

Men of Extreme Action

Big egos. Big explosions. Big box office. These are Men of Extreme Action. Two aging action stars are forced to become partners to save their movie careers. Action movies are dangerous, especially when a real rival tries to end their careers, permanently!

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DEDICATION

To all those who have repeated a famous action movie catchphrase and enjoyed saying it over and over again.

It was a good morning to kill a man.

The rising Mexican sun glittered over the wet jungle landscape. A young Spanish man with a dirty beard wore army fatigues and carried his automatic rifle over a wooden log bridge. He yawned, obviously near the end of his shift. He looked to his right as if anticipating the arrival of someone, when no one came, he pulled out a homemade smoke and lit up. He took a few drags and gazed at his nicotine stained hands in boredom.

Crash! A flock of birds took off into flight from the trees, startling the soldier. He panicked and pointed the rifle at the birds as they flew into the sun. His body tensed; he scanned the trees for movement. His body relaxed, as he saw nothing.

“False Alarm” he thought. He smiled. This assignment was the easiest money he ever made, hardly anyone ever came up into these mountains. He looked over to a mound of freshly dug dirt under the banana trees. The scientist had been an unfortunate casualty, but she should have known better. No one should travel in this jungle alone. He looked at his feet and saw another shadow appear.

“About time you got here Gerardo,” he yells.

As he turned, his smile became a grimace of pain and fear. Another flock of birds flew shrieking from the jungle into the sky.

One mile away in a small soldiers’ camp, early morning activity began as soldiers woke up for their shift. A cook started a fire with a small iron pan placed over the flames. He gazed downward into the greasy animal fat as it bubbled to a boil. Close to the mess hall was a large barrack hut; inside a row of dirty beds lined the edge of the wall. A soldier shaved in front of a cracked mirror; he pulled the blade deliberately over his face, never missing a spot. He wiped the shaving cream off his face with a towel and walked out in the main sleeping area. He kicked the bottom of the bunk beds with a bang

“Luis, get up,” he yells with a Spanish accent. He buttoned up a green army jacket over his tank top. He smiled and talked to the bed above him.

“The opium crop is good this year, no? This is the easiest money we have ever made; no one comes up into these mountains but a few hunters and some poor farmers. Hah, no one stands a chance against us.” The soldier beat his chest as he talked. He looked back to the unmoving bed. He frowned as a drop of liquid fell to the floor.

“Come on, its time to change the shift!” He grabbed the blanket and it is soaked with blood. He looked into the dead eyes of Luis. “No!” he screamed.

The soldier turned towards the door in anger and drew his weapon from his holster. A shadow fell upon his face. From the ceiling, an arm reached down, cradling a knife and sliced the soldier’s jugular. The soldier put his hand to his throat to stop the bleeding and looked down at disbelief to the crimson warm liquid covering his hand. He collapsed to his knees and his sightless eyes fell face first onto the floor. The shadow dropped from the ceiling to land noiseless to the floor. The assassin wiped his bloodied knife against the bedspread.

In another building further inside the camp was the command structure with several satellite dishes extending from the walls and roof. Inside the cabin, several electronic tracking devices, computers and weapons laid strewn around a worktable. Two soldiers were talking; one soldier was sitting in front of a desk while the other was issuing orders.

“Send the message in the usual way,” the larger officer commanded, patting his large stomach while he looked down at the smaller man working the communications display. “Let them know that the shipment will arrive at the prearranged time.”

“Yes sir!” The communications man saluted in attention and began typing into the laptop.

The door to the cabin kicked open and the assassin leapt into the room. The officer fumbled in surprise for his weapon and swiftly received a bullet to his brain. He crumpled to the floor. The assassin looked at the fallen body.

“At ease,” he directs to the dead officer. He scanned the communication soldier who was huddled, trembling under his desk.

“Where is the meeting place?” the assassin pointed an evil looking pistol at the centre of the small man’s forehead. The communications

soldier was confused, and his eyes were downcast to the floor as if he doesn't understand English. He spoke very quietly in Spanish and shrugged his shoulders.

"No Habla en Englas," he stuttered. The assassin frowned.

"I'm sorry, my Spanish is a little rusty. Let me try this approach" The assassin stepped towards the desk and pulled the smaller man up to his chair. He slammed the laptop door on the soldier's fingers and pushed the gun into the man's face.

"Aaaaahhhhh. I don't know! I don't know!!!" he screamed in English.

Seconds later two armed soldiers rushed in, one from the broken doorway, the other from the back entrance. The assassin pulled a second weapon from his waist and crossed both arms, leaping into the air between the two men, He shot each man with different weapon. They both fell lifeless to the floor. The assassin rose quickly, just in time to see the communication soldier reaching for his weapon hanging in a holster on the wall.

"I wouldn't do that!" the assassin shook one finger in the air. The communications soldier grasped the gun handle as the assassin pulled a bloody knife from his breast pocket and threw it at the soldier, pinning his hand to the wall. The soldier screamed as the assassin approached him.

"Now, think carefully", he said and relaxed in a chair, rolling closer to the soldier. The assassin pulled out another knife with a gleaming serrated edge.

"Now this next knife will cut something much more precious." The knife caught the morning sun through the window and reeks of death. The assassin smiled; he enjoyed his work." Now I only save this knife for special occasions . . ." he ran his finger along the edge. The soldier sweated while looking at his free hand. The assassin shook his head. The soldier stared down to his crotch. The assassin nodded his head. The soldier confessed.

"The village chapel, they will meet at the Chapel!"

"Well, that wasn't so hard now was it?" The assassin stood up and pulled his gun out of his holster.

“You’ve been a good boy, now take a nap!” He hit him with the butt of his gun, the soldier slumped unconscious, his hand still pinned to the wall.

The assassin walked out of the cabin; smoke was billowing around him from the carnage. The ground erupted in a hail of bullets from above his head. A combat helicopter screamed through the air passing above the cabin. The assassin pulled himself tight against the cabin and listened as something metallic rattles on the rooftop. Seconds later, the grenade landed at his feet. The concussive force blew the cabin into pieces and sent the assassin sailing through the air. He rolled and landed on one knee and turned, firing his gun at the grenade-throwing sentry in the tower. The assassin stared to the sky to see the oncoming helicopter. The pilot had the assassin dead in his sights and fired a barrage of bullets from his machine gun. Twin rows of bullets rushed death towards the assassin’s body. The assassin aimed knowing he had no cover and no place to run. He had to make his one-shot count.

“Crack!”

The bullet hole appeared in the helicopter windshield and the pilot never realized his own death as his lifeless hand let go of the joystick. The helicopter dropped out of the sky still flying towards the assassin. The assassin saw the oncoming blades and he raced towards the trees. The helicopter smashed into the ground, skidding and sliding, its blades chopping everything in its path. The distance closed between the assassin and the helicopter in seconds. Ten feet.... five feet until the assassin had no more room to run and was pressed against the bubble windows of the helicopter. The blades came to a screeching stop as the copter’s body stopped inches from a large palm tree, pinning the assassin. Another foot closer would have crushed him. He couldn’t move and fired at the windshield, shattering it into pieces. He stepped forward over the dead pilot and out through the copter.

In the distance, gunfire echoed. The assassin cocked his gun and readied himself for more bloodshed.

“I love the smell of gun powder in the morning!” He took two steps, tripped, and fell flat on his face.

“CUT!!!! Who put that pile of wood there? Steele, are you all right?”

The assassin looked angry but a lot less threatening. His perfect hair was dishevelled and dirt make-up over his face. He looked disgusted at the older man with a red blowhorn. The camps' atmosphere had changed and was now a bustle of activity as cameramen, gaffers, and stunt doubles spread around the movie set. The dead soldiers stood up and laughed at each other while drinking coffee. The smoke machine stopped, allowing the movie stage to clear.

This is the final crucial scene filmed for the major action movie release “Hostile Takeover!” The assassin was action star Steele Taylor, famous for a variety of action movies during the last decade. Six foot one and two hundred twenty pounds of muscled mayhem, he was currently sporting cropped blond hair and a constant frown on his weathered face. He's made millions with action movies in the past; but since the last five years he was desperately fighting to star in a movie that didn't bomb.

“I hate f%#@ mornings! Where is my stunt double? I refuse to do that scene again!” The actor stood up and wiped the dirt of his face. “Victor!” he yelled at the man standing beside him. “Fire the idiot who built this set! I was in character until this crap blew the whole scene! I want to speak to my agent?” He looked around the set.

“Steele just relax and take a breath,” Victor tried to reassure the aging actor in his most empathic tone. Victor was a paunchy balding man who acted more of Steele's cheerleader and guardian rather than his director. “Save some of your intensity for the movie. You were terrific, relax, we'll reshoot to just after your . . . fall.”

“Forget it Victor, I can't get hurt. I'm worth too much to this production.” Steele was unable to take direction unless it agreed with his own views. “Get Lance (Steele pointed to a stunt double with similar build who stood on the sideline) to finish the scene. Lance heard Steele's comment and nodded his head in agreement at Victor.

“No problem,” Lance replied. Victor motioned him to hold still and followed after Steele.

“Steele baby, I need you to do this final scene, people will be filling the seats to see you in this movie. Once this is done, you can take all

the time off that you need,” Victor cupped his hands together to beg Steele to reconsider. Steele stopped in mid stride.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Do you think I won’t be making anymore movies after today; do you think I’m washed up!” Victor cringed at Steele’s comments.

“Never Steele, you’re one of the most bankable action stars in Hollywood. We’ve made some great movies together.”

“Oh really, is that why the last three movies we’ve done together have bombed, Victor?” Steele thumbed his finger into Victor’s chest “Shoot the scene from the back and use Lance instead of me. Or stick my face on his body, they can fix everything in post, can’t they?” Steele stormed off the set. “I’ll be in my trailer!” he hollered back.

Lance watched Steele depart and rolled his eyes.

“The ‘king’ walks off on his final shoot,” he laughed knowingly with a cameraman. “This is the last day of shooting after four brutal months of filming. How can someone whose movies are going down the toilet still act like he can’t be replaced,” Lance shook his head.

“Hey, his movie ‘The Assassin’ broke box office records when it first came out eight years ago,” answered the cameraman.

“Exactly, eight years ago was the last time he made a successful original movie. Now he’s making sequels of movies that sucked to begin with. What a waste of a career.”

“You’ve been doing his stunts since the beginning; he was a pretty successful action star once. What’s happened to him?” the cameraman gazed at Lance.

“I think it’s all gone to his head, he’s an arrogant son of bitch on the best of days and no one likes working with him. All his negativity infects the set, and no one wants to work on his movies; if only his few remaining fans knew what a jerk he really is. The guy’s washed up!” Lance walked onto the set to complete the scene.

Steele marched to his trailer; his foul mood darkened. A young boy stood at the fence border and he waved a piece of paper. Steele’s initial reaction was to blow off this young fan; after all he was a busy action star.

But as he passed, the boy’s face reminded him of a setting decades ago as he was clamouring for the autograph for the swash-buckling star

'Errol Trent'. At age seven, Steele slipped away from home in the early morning and jumped on a bus without his mom's permission. He pretended to be the son of a young executive by walking onto the movie set and passed by the security guard. He walked unhindered through the set until his idol stepped up beside him.

"Hey kid, can you get me a drink of water?" asked Errol, thinking the young boy was a helper on the set. Steele rushed to the water fountain to fill a paper cup for his hero.

"Thanks kid" replied Errol as he drank the cup and tossed it into a nearby trash can. Steele lasted another two hours before being kicked off the set. Despite the spanking his mother gave him when he got home, the crumpled paper cup became a trophy for him that inspired his career. The boy's question brings him back to reality.

"Aren't you Steele Taylor?" the young boy jumped with excitement. Steele looked around to make sure no one from the set was watching. He had a reputation and he didn't want anyway seeing him approach the fan.

"In the flesh, are you here to see me?" as he stepped to the fence.

"I can't believe this; do you know how long I've waited here just hoping to get a glimpse of you? Could you sign this for me?" he passed his paper and pen through the fence. Steele hesitated.

"I don't usually sign autographs," as the memory of his childhood star flashed through his mind. Wasn't this part of the joy of being an action star? Why had it been so long since he had talked to one of his fans? Is this why his career seems like it was coming to an end?

"What's your name?"

"Jimmy! I'm your biggest fan!"

"Well Jimmy here's my autograph, make sure to tell your friends. I'm sure you'll want to show it off." Steele passed the paper back through the fence. The boy snatched it and bounded away with excitement.

"Show it off, I can get hundred dollars for this on Ebay!" the boy disappeared around a corner of a building. Steele was speechless. Maybe that's what the business has become for him, the money.

Steele climbed up a few steps and entered the trailer, slamming the door behind him. He grabbed a cell phone under a pile of clothes. He dialed, hitting the speed number for his agent's line. As the phone rang,

Steele looked around the trailer, seeing his face splashed across a number of 'B' action movies posters hanging on the walls. After three rings, he heard the phone picked up on the other end.

"Toni, it's Steele. We need to talk about my next picture."

On the receiving end of the phone call was an attractive red head named Toni Fountaine. She had represented Steele from the very early days of his career; running her company from a seedy rundown motel in Hollywood. She couldn't afford a secretary and the walls were covered with post it notes to remind her of meetings and appointments. Today, she worked out of an elegant office in the heart of Los Angeles on Wilshire Boulevard.

She was a tough negotiator and had been the mastermind behind many of Steele's successful action movies. Her management style made millions for both of them. She's had a long history with Steele and despite his grating personality, had always had a good relationship with him. She's seen Steele's career go from the box office hey days of his early films to the disappointing returns of his last five action films.

"Since you're calling me so early in the day, I'm assuming filming is going well for your final day of shooting." Toni asks.

"No, things are not going well at all. Victor has run this picture into the ground. I only took this made for video movie because I was desperate; I hadn't worked for nine months before this! But do you know how much it costs to keep my house in Pasadena?"

"You have it so tough Steele," Toni replied.

"Don't patronize me Toni, worst of all, Victor is ruining what's left of my career, my box office was a guaranteed hundred million before we started working with him."

"What's happened now?" she faked interest.

"Don't treat me like a juvenile Toni, remember you still have a job because of me. Agents are easy to replace!"

Toni signed; this wasn't the first time that Steele has used this idle threat. She wasn't afraid to give it back to Steele.

"You've got it wrong Steele; you have a job because me! Do you know how tough it's been trying to sell you lately to producers? Everyone wants the young upcoming action stars because they're willing to put their body on the line. When's the last time you really pushed yourself for your fans?"

Steele remained unfazed. He lifted up a wrist weight and started strengthening his hand.

“Don’t give me that fan crap, people want to see me on the screen, millions of sold movie tickets don’t lie.”

“Stop living in the past Steele, you need a hit now!”

“That’s your job Toni, give me the right action vehicle and I’ll ride it to the bank!”

Well, just so happens Steele, I am finalizing your next picture as we speak. It’s got the makings of a winner.!”

“Hah, that’s what you said about this one. “He leaned back in his chair. “My movies are taking a dive into the toilet. I need something new, these morons on the set are wasting my talent. I’m a star Toni, when are you going to get me a star vehicle?”

“Relax Steele, your overall box office is still bankable. So, you’ve had a few stinkers lately, even Tom Cruise goes through a dry spell from time to time. Trust me, this next movie is a sure-fire hit. Your co-star is very excited to meet you.”

Steele jumped out of his chair.

“Co-star!!!! Toni, I am the star, no one shares my billing! There is the star, there is the supporting staff, there are the extras. I don’t share with any other stars. Understand?”

“Steele, baby don’t get into an uproar, you have a supper meeting with him tonight, you can settle everything then”

“Toni, who am I meeting?”

“He’s a big player in the action field too, Steele.”

“Who Toni?”

“Of course, he’s doesn’t have your bank ability stats.”

“Stop trying to flatter me Toni, who am I meeting?”

“Wolfe Neilson.”

“What? That alcoholic has-been; he hasn’t made a good action film in years. He’ll drag any project into the ground. Forget it, I’m not working with him.” Steele paced around his trailer and kicked a trashcan into the corner.

“Steele listen, the focus groups have come in, and the public wants to see the two of the greatest action heroes team up together. It will be an instant blockbuster!”

“Blockbuster? How will you keep that drunk sober enough to do a scene? Wrong Toni, get me another project!” Toni was silent on the line.

“Toni, do you hear me, get another project or get rid of Neilson!”

“Steele there is nothing else. Your last few movies have been less than stellar at the box office. I can’t even get you a made for TV deal. If you don’t take this project, I’ve got nothing for you.”

“This is crazy, how could you do this? I have to sink to an all time low to work with Wolfe Neilson.”

“What is your issue with Wolfe? From what I understand, the two of you worked as stuntmen together when you were both starting out.”

“That was a lifetime ago Toni, I hate his guts!”

“Jesus Steele, I’m not asking you to become his best friend. You’re an actor for God’s sake, pretend you like him. Stars never get along with each other. Suck it up!”

Steele realized that there was no other choice but to accept Toni’s offer, but being gracious wasn’t Steele’s style.

“Okay Toni, as a favour to you, I’ll meet him with you tonight. But Wolfe had better have his drinking problem solved. Understand?”

“Steele, he hasn’t had a drink for ages.”

Classical music resonated from a rich condo in Beverly Hills. Empty wine glasses were piled beside the tub. The bathroom was huge with a jacuzzi large enough to fit five people. Wolfe Neilson sat in a bubble bath with his hairy chest exposed waist deep in the water. He was in his early forties, tanned and muscular with dishevelled black hair. Compared to Steele’s bulk, he was lean and agile. Wolfe portrayed characters of grace, culture and elegance compared to Steele’s no hold barred, shoot first and ask questions later approach.

He’s played suave action stars for years and can imitate a British secret agent at the drop of a hat. In his movies, he always pulled out a secret gadget or special weapon that saved the day. His cool, confident manner had given Wolfe the reputation of a womanizing bad boy and he was always making the scandal magazines. Unfortunately, for the last couple years he’s made more news for drunken escapades rather than the movies he’s made. He’s fought battles for years in the movies and won, his fight with staying sober has not been as successful.

The phone rang, he dropped his wine glass into the tub, searched for it, pulled it out, blew off the suds and took another drink. He then answered the phone.

“Welcome, this is Neilson, Wolfe Neilson at your service,” his hand with the phone knocks several wine glasses down behind him.

“Wolfe, it’s Toni.”

“Hey gorgeous, I was just thinking about you.” Toni doesn’t take the bait.

“I’m sure you were Wolfe. Well, I made the deal with Steele.”

“You did?” Wolfe almost dropped another wine glass into his bath. “He hates me Toni. How the hell did you persuade him?”

“I’ll explain later; but you’re definitely right, he does hate you. Do you mind telling me why?”

“It’s complicated Toni, let’s just say the guy’s an arrogant prick who only cares about himself.”

“You still didn’t answer my question Wolfe. Steele may not care for many people, but he has a real hate on for you. Are you going to be able to work with him?”

“Toni, give me a drink and I can work with the devil himself!”

“Wolfe smarten up. You have to promise me that you will not drink at all during tonight’s meeting”

“Toni, Toni, Toni! You know I don’t drink very much anymore. Just a socialable drink, now and then.” He takes another sip of his wine.

“I’m serious Wolfe, if Steele gets one whiff of alcohol on your breath, this deal is thru and so are we.”

“Relax, I’ll be dry, “he splashed some water on his face,” there’ll be no problems on this end. Besides I really need the money, I haven’t worked for months. I’ll see you at nine.”

“The meeting’s at eight. Will you write it down?!” Toni snapped the end of her pencil in frustration. In the bathroom Wolfe grabbed a pen, looked for paper and then wrote on his hand instead.

“I’ll be there, you can count on me. Love you Toni!”

“Yah, I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the pretty ones. See ya tonight” Wolfe placed the phone down.

“It’s happy hour.” He takes the last gulp of his wine. He puts his glass down, grabs a bar of soap and washes under his armpit. He looks

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at his hand in puzzlement as the ink washed off. “Now what time am I supposed to meet again?”

Toni hung up the phone and stared around her office. She turned to look out the 20th floor view facing downtown Los Angeles. Traffic slithered along numerous arteries through the heart of movie land.

“How am I going to keep this together,” she spoke to herself. “I’ve worked too hard for too many years to keep these action stars in money making movies and now it all comes to one movie to keep everything afloat.” She picked up a promotional junket on Steele. “On the one hand, I have an actor who thinks the world revolves around his every whim, alienating his whole film crew, movie after movie.” She puts the junket down and looks at a movie poster with Wolfe’s smiling face. “On the other hand, I have an action star who everyone loves but the drunk can’t stay sober for more than twenty-four hours at a time and eventually sabotages every movie he makes. Can two losers make a success?”

Chapter 2

Double Impact

Blackjack's Restaurant

8:05 pm

A white limousine pulled up to the trendy and exclusive Blackjack's restaurant of Beverly Hills. An elderly woman stepped out of her car accompanied by a man half her age. She laughed and slapped his butt motioning him ahead to get their table. The valet handed her a playing card with a listing of tonight's specials.

Welcome to this month's restaurant fad for the Hollywood's elite. Everything was a playing card theme, waiters are dressed as dealers, and paintings of cards games hang on the walls. In the back of the establishment, gambling tables are set up for a night of high rollers. Steele and Toni are already seated at a table that overlooks the establishment and gave them a bird's eye view of everyone entering. The air was warm and clear as the ocean breeze blew the smog off to sea. It's another beautiful LA evening. A waiter walked over to Steele who pointed to his drink.

"Hit me! Steele exclaimed.

The waiter filled the glass and then hesitated before leaving, as if he wanted to say something. Steele rolled his eyes.

"Yes?" Steele glared.

"I'm so sorry to bother you but my younger brother is a huge fan, could I get an autograph?"

Steele took a deep breath and motioned to the waiter to come closer so he could whisper to him.

"Where is your manager?"

"Pardon?"

"Where is your manager?"

"Over by the wall by the gambling table in the blue uniform." He pointed to the manager and Steele waved.

"If you don't leave me alone and leave this table right now, I will go over to him and have your ass fired. Any questions?"

"No sir, sorry to have bothered, I'm leaving now." He rushed off in a hurry. Steele turned towards Toni.

“Great job on picking the restaurant. You think staff would know better than to bother the customers at a classy place. I wish these fans would get a life.”

“Keep that up Steele and you’ll have no fans left. Would it hurt you so much to be decent to your supporters for once? You know there may come a day when no one wants your autograph anymore.”

“Yeah whatever Toni,” He dismissed her with a wave. He remembered his earlier encounter with the kid.

“Where is Wolfe?”

“He’s coming, don’t worry.” She opened her briefcase and handed Steele a docket of papers. “Let’s go over the contract. The two of you will get equal billing and remuneration.” Steele scanned the first page.

“That’s insane Toni, I’m twice the star he is, and you know it!”

“Know it or not Steele, his total box office is over four billion worldwide.”

“Jesus Toni, the man had a couple fluke hits in the late eighties that put his dollar value up. Look at him now, his last three movies have tanked, he hasn’t been a bankable star in years. I don’t want to work with him. Period.”

“I’ve already explained this to you Steele. Your last four pictures have been mediocre at best and have all lost money. “

Steele slammed the table.

“That’s the director’s fault, not mine, they couldn’t direct a picture to save their ass. And the script, that’s another thing! The writing has been horrible, can’t those idiots come up with one original thought? Now my stunt double is whole other story . . . “

“Steele, nobody cares why the movies were bombs; you know, and I know, that if a movie does well, the star gets the credit.”

“Naturally”

“But if a movie flops, the star takes the fall regardless of where the blame should lie. If you don’t sign on with Wolfe, there’s not a producer in town who will bankroll a picture with you in it. Do you want to get stuck guest starring in some has-been reality series?”

“Relax Toni, I’ll do the movie, but make sure my name appears first on the credits, okay?”

Toni shook her head in disbelief. Steele peered over at the main entrance.

“Hey look, the drunk’s here.”

Wolfe Neilson opened the door to his classic red 1963 Chevy Impala Super Sport convertible. He tossed his keys to the valet and shared a joke with the hostess. He waved to people at the tables, shook hands with a few of the waiters and worked the crowd. Wolfe could have been a politician in another life. Steele looked and then cupped his head.

“Look at that lush, trying to welcome every fan, he’s pathetic!”

“You know it wouldn’t hurt you to be friendly, to the people around you for a change.” She kicked him under the table.

“Nice guys finish last Toni, women don’t want a nice guy; they want someone dangerous, cruel, exciting.”

“Cruel you got down pat Steele. Dangerous? Exciting? I think you’re still living your movie role.”

“Funny Toni.” Steele watched Wolfe approach the table. “Oh great, here it comes.”

Toni stood and embraced Wolfe. He gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Hi ya sweetie. You look like you’ve lost weight. Have I told you how beautiful you look today?”

“Yes, once already on the phone. But I’ll take the compliment just the same.” She sniffed the air and then pulled Wolfe aside. She whispered in his ear.

“You smell like a breath mint Wolfe; please tell me you haven’t been drinking?”

“Toni, I’m offended. You can’t have bad breath when meeting my adoring public. Besides you never know when you might kiss a beautiful woman.” He leaned in to kiss Toni on the lips but she turned her head and he kissed her cheek instead. She looked over to Steele whose has been watching but couldn’t hear their conversation.

“Wolfe I’m sure you know Steele.” Wolfe reached his hand to Steele.

“Hey buddy, I hear you want to be in my movie, that’s great you’ll be an excellent sidekick.” Steele jumped out of his chair in shock.

“Your movie, your sidekick!” A vein almost burst in Steele’s forehead, as his face turned red.

“You stupid lush, are you drunk out of your mind? I’m the star of this picture. You’ll be lucky if you don’t pass out into a stupor before a workday is done.” Steele stood and turned to Toni.

“This is ridiculous, I thought you told this has-been about the picture and his role in it.”

Wolfe had a huge smirk on his face.

“Relax Steele” Toni turned to Wolfe, “I think he is pulling your leg.” Wolfe is bent over with one arm supporting his weight on the table as he laughed deeply.

“Beautiful and observant, what a combination.” Wolfe winked at Toni and then stared at Steele.

“Yes, Steele this ‘has-been’ was just playing with you to get a reaction. Mission Accomplished!” Wolfe sat down and the other two joined him in their seats. “Now if the hissy fit is done.” Steele glared at Wolfe. “I’d like to order a drink.”

“Non-alcoholic, I presume,” Toni pointed to a waiter.

“Well you got it half right. Waiter!”

A waiter stepped from the bar and placed a drink on the table.

“What’s this” Wolfe sniffed his drink.

“The lady requested your drink beforehand sir”

“Which is....?”

“I thought iced tea would be quite refreshing on a cool spring evening. Cheers,” Toni clinked her glass with his.

“Wonderful,” Wolfe sipped and made a face as if he was drinking poison. “I must remember to never come here again.” Steele tapped his foot as his patience was running out.

“Anybody ready to talk business yet?” Steele asked. Wolfe talked into his watch.

“Control, this is red eagle. I’m about to begin business negotiations. Please keep a wide perimeter. Over.” Steele lost his cool.

“Will you grow up?” as Steele lost his cool. “We are not in one of your British secret agent B-movies. You do not have special gadgets to talk to. This is real life. Are you listening to me?” Wolfe paused and continued to talk into his watch.

“Subject is extremely agitated, please proceed with extreme caution.” Toni put her arm between the two them to focus their attention on her.

“That’s enough, both of you. Let’s get to the business at hand.”
Toni opened a binder with copies of scripts.

“This movie project is going to make the three of us lots of money.”
She handed a copy to both. “Together,” she looked at both of them,
“the two of you can generate a box office more than double any movie
you have ever done separately.”

“Twice as big would still be a bust for that drunk,” Steele jeered.

“All the marketing costs in the world still couldn’t get fans to see
your last film,” snarled Wolfe.

“Enough, boys settle down. Open your scripts to page thirty-eight.”
Toni opened her script as Wolfe and Steele turned the pages. They read
the section to themselves. Toni gazed at Steele and Wolfe.

“This stunt will require some complicated wirework; it’s going to
be really tricky to pull this off.”

“Yea so, that’s what stunt people are for, we’ll stick them in our
place. That way Wolfe won’t get sick and puke his guts all over me.”
Wolfe pushes his drink away.

“You never let go, will you? Even an elephant buries a grudge
eventually. It was as much your fault as you like to blame me!” Toni
was puzzled.

“What really happened between the two of you?” They both glare at
each other.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” they said in unison. Toni dismissed
them with her hand.

“At least the two of you agree on something. What happened in the
past stays in the past. The two of you need to get over your bad blood
and move on so we can do this picture. Now let’s get back to the
wirework stunts.”

“I have no problem doing it, Steele’s just afraid that the stuntmen
will drop him if they get half a chance,” commented Wolfe.

“What the hell do you know about my stuntmen? Sure, they’re not
the best, they let me down a few times, they’re lazy, . . .”

“Jesus Steele, you treat everyone like garbage. Ever consider that
you could be to blame for your bad movies.”

“You should talk about the mistakes you made. Were you even
sober during the filming of your last movie?”

“Better pack your bags, Steele’s taking us a guilt trip,” deadpans Wolfe.

“He’s got a point!” Toni jumped in.

“What is this, are you going to side with him? I thought you were my agent?” asked Wolfe.

“On this project, I’m both your agents and caretaker to look after your huge egos. Besides, you know me, I always call a spade, a spade!” Toni pulled out a card from the deck on the table and laid it down. It was the Queen of Spades.

“Cute trick, I’ll do the stunt.... but I might need some ...additional training” Steele expanded his chest out.

“What’s wrong Steele, are you feeling a little flabby?” Wolfe flexed a muscle and kissed his bicep. “I can show you how to ‘pump up’.” He posed.

“Actually, starting tomorrow, you both begin training.” Toni mentioned nonchalantly as she peered at the menu.

“What?” they both replied.

She dropped the menu onto the table.

“Listen, if the two of you want to make a comeback, you’ve got to start fresh. Sure, you’re both hunks,” Wolfe smiled while Steele looked less pained, “but you need to buff up and look your best if you want to keep up with the competition.”

As they continued their negotiations, a black limo stopped at the front of the restaurant. The limo door opened and out stepped Blaze Vansome, a much younger action star, six feet two and martial arts lean with a permanent scar along the right side of his face. He checked his car mirror to view his immaculate haircut. His mirrored sunglasses allow no one to see his eyes. Cold and emotionless, he is Hollywood’s hottest box office action star and he knew it. He was shallow, not in love with making movies but in love with the money and fame that came with success. He believes his own press.

Two perfect sideburns line his face and disappear into a point at his cheek. He was king of the heap, Blaze’s climb up the Hollywood ladder has been at the expense of others and he would do anything to stay there. He took personal pride in ending the careers of others to increase his box office might.

On either side, two identical twin bodyguards walked beside him; two huge deported Greeks from the island of Crete, they were massive and hairy. At the beach with their shirts off, it would be easy to mistake them as furry gorillas. Both men were beefy meatheads short on brainpower but huge on brawn. They were ex-wrestlers who made a living beating people up; both love to start a fight. Still using their entertainment names of 'Crash' and 'Burn', their real names have been long forgotten. At six foot six and almost three hundred pounds each, competition was sparse. These two watchdogs would stand out anywhere, they wore clothes to show off their hairy chests and gold chains, a gaudy wrestling look that was appropriate ten years ago.

People in the restaurant noticed Blaze and his entourage, creating a greater arrival buzz than the two aging action heroes. The hostess escorted the three of them to the other side of the restaurant to sit at a table by a huge fountain. It was the best seat in the restaurant.

"Hey Blaze, check out the table over there" The bodyguard pointed towards Steele and Wolfe.

"Should I be impressed, Crash? All I see is a couple of aging has-beens who should have gone out of the action movie business a long time ago." Blaze bended his forearm showing a finely sculpted muscle. "Fans want an action hero who is larger than life, a finely tuned machine who they believe can destroy any opponent. Like me. Look at them," he pointed. "They're old, they both must be in their FORTIES. Neither one of them have made a decent movie in years. They can't even do their own stunts anymore. They're yesterday's news." Blaze reviewed his menu.

"Speaking of competition, do you see who just walked in?" Toni pointed and both men looked up to see Blaze cover his face with a menu.

"Blaze Vansome, young action star on the rise. I had the misfortune of having him work as stunt man on one of my movie's years ago. The guy's arrogance makes Steele look like Mother Theresa," said Wolfe.

"Arrogance? I heard Vansome's so full of himself that the guy empties out a gym before he'll work out in it. Apparently the negative 'energies' from other people ruins his workout," commented Steele.

“Mock him all you want guys, but he’s in the kind of physical shape that I was talking about, the kind of shape the two of you used to be in,” Toni chastised the two of them.

“Why waste time training with that idiot,” Steele pointed at Wolfe.

“What’s wrong, are you worried that beside better looking, that I can lift more weight than you?” laughed Wolfe.

“Listen, with those spaghetti arms you couldn’t out lift my grandmother.”

“Why don’t we put it to the test right now!” Wolfe held out his arm across the table to lock wrists with Steele in a classic challenge of arm wrestling. Steele gladly obliged.

“I’m going crush your little secret agent’s arm.” Steele grabbed Wolfe’s wrist while each man held the edge of the table with their other hand for leverage.

“It’s not just brute strength, it’s technique.” Wolfe took first advantage and pulled Steele’s arm down.”

“Maybe at the start, but in the end superior strength will win the day.” Steele changes momentum and pulled Wolfe’s arm down to the table. They are both struggling to keep their holds and puffing hard as their faces become very red.

“Apologize or suffer the consequences,” Steele croaked

“You first,” Wolfe gasped.

The rest of the restaurant quiets down and focused on their battle. The waiters rushed over to end to the dispute. Toni stopped them with a twenty-dollar bill. “Let’s see how this plays out.”

Wolfe leaned close to the table. “Asshole!” he yelled.

Steele leans even closer. “Alcoholic!” he grunted.

Both gasped harder and harder for air. Neither one would give up.

Toni stood up to leave and dropped a card between the two of them.

“We’ll see you two lovebirds at this gym tomorrow at 7am if you both want a job. Bye boys.” She sauntered out the main entrance.

The two of them watched her as she left, and then back at each other with hatred. Their faces were as red as beets.

“Give up” cried Wolfe.

“You first” squawked Steele.

The table collapsed sending both actions stars tumbling to the ground.

Chapter 3

Pain & Gain

Day 1 – Iron Dog’s Gym

7am

The logo in front of the gym was a pit bull with a steel jaw locked onto a meat bone. Iron Dog’s was built for your typical muscle-bound clientele. Many patrons lacked the anatomical feature of a neck and appeared to be experimenting with various levels of steroid abuse. The gym was high tech with all the latest exercise equipment, but with plenty of free weights for the old school body builder. Even at this early hour, plenty of activity ensued with the smell of sweat in the air. The gym was located on the movie set with an exclusive list of clients. Only actors and stunt people had the privilege to work out here, training before and during a gruelling movie shoot.

A short muscular Asian man walked into the gym with a cane in his right hand. He was one of the most sought-after trainers in the action movie business, obtaining an almost cult like status among its stars. His training mixed a high level of physical and metal training that took his students to a higher level. He was known for his unorthodox training methods which gave considerable pain to the trainee. But his plans must be followed to the letter for the trainee to become successful, no exceptions. He had trained at this gym for many years; many major stars had been under his tutelage at one point in their careers.

Today he was about to receive two new students.

He observed and studied the activity around him and quickly scribbled on a notepad. He looked at his watch. The clock on the wall stroke seven am and Steele walked in. He was dressed in the latest athletic gear and had showered for the workout. He walked over to the bald man.

“All right, I hear you are the trainer for the movie; I’m ready to go, where do I begin?” The Asian man measured Steele for several seconds before answering.

“Patience my pupil, my other student has not arrived yet. My name is Mr. Pang.”

“Well PANG, I’m here to work out. If you won’t help me then I’ll do it on my own. Are we doing cardio or are we starting with weights?” Steele picked up a barbell and began bench curls.

“That is where you are mistaken, we will be working out your mind before we try to salvage your body,” Pang nudged Steele’s leg with his cane. Steele put down the barbell and laughed.

“Oh great, I’m stuck with the sensei from the Karate Kid. You’re not going to ask me to wax on and wax off, are you?” Steele rotated buffing motions with his hands. Mr. Pang nodded his head as if he understood everything about Steele.

“Your defence mechanism is to ridicule everything you don’t understand,” commented Pang.

“Yeah whatever, Mr. Meioigi.”

Steele turned and worked out on one of the machines. Wolfe walked in several minutes later looking like he just rolled out of bed. He had bed head; his clothes were ripped and torn as if he was in a fight with a tiger. Wolfe was not a morning person. Steele saw him enter the gym and stood behind him.

“Good morning,” he snickered. Wolfe was jittery and bumped into the weight pile knocking a few to the ground. “What’s wrong Wolfe, not used to getting up before noon?”

Wolfe regained his balance and shrugged his head.

“Why do you have to be the first person I talk to at this ungodly hour. Shouldn’t you be still sleeping under your bridge?”

“Har, Har. If you think I act like a troll, at least I don’t smell like one. Pwehehh, what kind of aftershave are you wearing, Budweiser du jour?”

“Aftershave?” He looked more carefully at Steele. He noticed that Steele appears immaculate for the morning workout.

“Oh my god, you look like you bought the latest clothes from GQ. I bet you washed, showered, and bathed in cologne before you came here.”

“Aftershave, you idiot. I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of it by the way you smell.”

Wolfe looked at Steele in disgust.

“You got dressed up and washed to work out. You do know that we’re going to sweat, and you have to wash again?”

“Still no excuse to look like a slob. By the way, love the way you comb your hair.” Wolfe pushed down a cowlick.

“I had just about enough of you this morning.” Wolfe stepped threatening towards Steele. Steele put his face two inches from Wolfe’s face.

“What are you going to do it about it?”

Mr. Pang stepped in-between the two yelling actors.

“Neither of you will be permitted to partake in any fighting while under my tutorship.”

The two of them stopped and looked at each other.

“Who’s the Kung-fu guy?” Wolfe asked Steele.

“He’s our instructor, watch out or he’ll get you to wash his car,” Steele teased. Mr. Pang grabbed Steele’s thumb and pushed him down to the floor. Steele’s laughter turned to cries as he knelt on the floor.

“Stop it, you’re hurting me!”

“No keep going, you’re killing me,” Wolfe almost doubled over with laughter at seeing the much smaller man take Steele down. “If you guys are going to play for awhile, I could use a drink.” Wolfe is about to walk past and was immediately brought down by Mr. Pang who grabbed his thumb with his other arm. Wolfe dropped to his knees and cried in agony. “Oh right, I’ll stay here. Ooowwww! Take it easy, you’re hurting me!”

“Not so funny when the shoe is on the other foot is it?” Steele turned his head slightly through his pain

“Foot, this guy is ripping my thumb out of it socket, owwww,” Wolfe moaned.

“Maybe next time you help me out instead of laughing, owwww.” Steele grimaced

Both cried in pain in unison.

“Enough! You are here to study under my tutelage methods of PTA, Personal Training Augmentation. I have been training actors for over twenty years into the finest shape of their lives. I may even be able to help the likes of you.” Mr. Pang released their hands.

“Well, you’re a real motivator,” added Wolfe as he nursed his thumb.

“You know I won't be able to wash your car with my bum hand,” said Steele.

“Your sarcasm will bring you much pain. Now drop and given me twenty push-ups.”

“But my hand hurts”

“In that case make it thirty”

“But . . .”

“Forty!”

“I suggest you do it unless you want your thumb removed,” Wolfe whispered to Steele. Steele dropped to the floor and gave forty push-ups, howling on each one as it hurt his thumb. Wolfe approached Mr. Pang cautiously, looking at Pang's small hands that submitted him to the floor.

“Pretty impressive, will you teach us any of those moves?”

Mr. Pang looked at Wolfe in silence.

“Those ‘moves’ will not be part of your training until later on. In the beginning, we will train body and mind, although you are both strong physically, you both have weakness in spirit. Your comrade is weak in empathy, you are weak in discipline.”

“Whoa Mr. Master trainer,” Wolfe backed away from Mr. Pang. “I never asked anyone to fix my spiritual weaknesses, I'm here for a physical workout, nothing more.”

“Then perhaps you should talk to your agent. The contract you both signed with her gives me total control over your training. If you do not comply with my wishes,” Mr. Pang flashed a toothy smile, “then I can remove either one of you from the movie.”

“What did you say?” Steele finished and looked at the photocopy contract that Mr. Pang handed out. Both Steele and Wolfe read over the highlighted small print.

“I'll be damned, Toni's got us by the short and curly's. One wrong move with Mr. Pang and we can lose out on the whole movie deal.”

“Didn't you read your contract?”

“Didn't you?”

“I always let Toni read it.”

“Exactly.”

“Then for an hour each day.”

“You are my disciples,” Mr. Pang stood with his arms crossed. “To do what ever I ask you to do.” Both Steele and Wolfe stare at each other and wonder if they are having a common nightmare

“Are you both ready to begin?” Mr. Pang flashed another playful grin and moved to one of the weight machines. Wolfe spoke to Steele.

“I think I know what his PTA program really stands for.”

“What?” Steele answered back.

“Pain, torture and agony!”

Iron Dog’s sauna

8:10am

Wolfe and Steele collapsed, too exhausted to move, on the wooden bench in a steam-filled sauna, letting the steam billow around them.

“What the hell was that about? I’ve got muscles that I didn’t know existed that are hurting,” Steele tried to flex his bicep.

“Well he must have missed a few because your lips are still flapping away.”

“I least I didn’t almost fall asleep during my bench press. You’re lucky you didn’t have a weight above you.”

“Gee Steele, I didn’t know you cared.”

“Trust me I don’t.”

“Listen, I’m not a morning person, the nights are for partying and the morning are for

“Sleeping, I get it.”

Dong! A loud gong sound reverberated through the intercom.

“All right breakfast, I’m starved.” Steele rubbed his hands in anticipation.

They put their robes on and rushed to the foyer. There was a dining room separated from the gym. At the far end of the room, a door to the outside where the golf carts picked up stars to take them back to the movie set. They sat down at a table with plates and utensils. Mr. Pang approached with two covered plates.

“Can’t wait, I’m famished,” said Wolfe.

“Then by all means, dig in”. Mr. Pang pulled off the cover to reveal two dishes of something that resembles eggs and bacon. Wolfe and Steele looked at each other and then back to Mr. Pang.

“Pang, what’s this,” asked Wolfe.

“My student, these are tofu eggs and wheat bacon with some cottage cheese. We must purge the poisons in your body. This food will flush out the toxins.”

“That’s funny I do feel like purging right now,” Steele stared at the food.

“Flushing seems more appropriate to me,” remarked Wolfe.

“Don’t worry; from now on, I’ve made the chef on the set aware of your SPECIAL NEEDS.”

The two of them stared at each other and then turned to Pang who has mysteriously disappeared into thin air.

“How did he do that?” asks Wolfe.

“Toni!” Steele cried.

Meeting with Toni

9:00am

Steele and Wolfe ride in a golf cart in the back while Toni and the driver are in front. The two of them were miserable from the pain of the workout and angry about breakfast. Neither one was very happy with her.

“Toni, what the hell are you doing to us? That trainer is a power tripping, karate kid reject, authoritative, bossy,” Steele vented.

“Maniac!” Wolfe jumped in.

“Yea a maniac!”

“He’s a Gestapo with an axe to grind.”

“He pushed us like a pair of adolescent school kids.”

“I refuse to meet him again,” Steele folded his arms. “Next time he’ll be serving some pre-packaged veggie shit.”

“I’m hungry! I’d kill for a chocolate bar.” Wolfe yelled to the young intern driving. “Hey kid, can you stop at a vending machine?” The intern looked at them and then at Toni who shook her head. Wolfe slumped back into his seat and then gazed at Toni. “You wouldn’t have any in your purse, would you?” Wolfe turned to Steele. “Let’s get her.”

Toni backed away and pulled out a can of mace from her purse causing the two of them to reconsider.

“Enough! The two of you are acting like a bunch of children. It’s too hard! He pushes us too much. I need food! Have you guys ever

listened to yourself? You both signed the contract and I don't care if you didn't read everything, this trainer is for your own good. Mr. Pang has trained the best actors in the world, the least you can do is give him chance. Both of you need to clean up your act to have a hope in hell of making a profit on this movie. Now are you going to give Mr. Pang a chance or are you going to give up like a bunch of losers?"

They bowed their heads in shame.

Wolfe looked at Steele "She's tough!"

Steele turned back "I know."

"This is your last chance. Both of you! Now smarten up and follow everything that Mr. Pang tells you to do, okay? She stared both of them down.

"Everything?" They said in unison as they raised their heads.

"Yes, everything!" Toni yelled. "Now less complaining let's go over the shooting schedule with the location manager."

"Ok, ok," Wolfe raised his hands in resignation and leaned over to Steele, "let's face it, Pang can't make it any worse for us tomorrow than he already has."

Iron Dog's Sauna Day 2

8:05am

The sound of wind blowing howls through the room with an almost deafening sound. Wolfe and Steele are wrapped in heavy parkas, huge beads of sweat poring off their faces. The two of them stared at each other in a silent pained expression as if each had something to say. A hand stopped a disc player. Mr. Pang looked across the room, sitting on the bench in his robe.

"You know the sound of wind doesn't make it any cooler in here," spat Steele. The three of them were sitting in the gruelling hot cramped quarters of the sauna.

"Nor does the sound of your voice, keep your coats on for another minute.' Mr. Pang commanded.

"Way to go big mouth, always got something to say," Wolfe plugged Steele in the shoulder.

"Make that two additional minutes," Mr. Pang calmly decreed and then moved his legs into a meditative yoga position while closing his eyes.

Both actors silently faced each other as if to strike and then after thinking about the repercussions, both bodies slumped into quiet submission. Both faced look flushed from the heat and they were on the verge of passing out. Mr. Pang gazed at his watch; both looked at him in anticipation. He rose; both men got their arms on the edge of their collars, ready to take their coats off. Mr. Pang turned away and grabbed another part of his newspaper. Both are dejected and Steele was ready to curse, Wolfe put a finger to his lips to shut up. Mr. Pang turned his head as both men composed themselves and smiled back.

“Time,” Mr. Pang said.

“Thank Jesus, another minute and I would have dropped from heat exhaustion,” Steele unzipped and threw his coat on the floor.

“I hope you don’t plan on use these coats again Pang, I think I lost five pounds of sweat in this heat blanket.” Wolfe held his jacket and droplets of sweat dripped to the wooden floor. He dropped his coat and both men walked to the door.

“Wait, you have passed the test, but have you learned the lesson?” Mr. Pang inquired as both men stopped and turned to face him.

“Pang, please, we just want to have a cold shower, can’t we learn the lesson later?” begged Steele.

Mr. Pang looked at the discarded jackets. Both men realized what was going to happen if they don’t play along. Not wanting to risk wearing the jackets again, they both sat down again.

“Think hard on what has happened to you,” Mr. Pang asked.

“Well we sweated,” Steele wiped his forehead.

“A lot,” Wolfe dabbed his towel under his armpit.

“In stinky jackets.”

“I almost passed out.”

“I think I still might” Steele doesn’t look well.

“Enough!” Mr. Pang yelled. “Stop thinking about yourselves for one minute. What is the lesson? What have you learned?”

Both looked at themselves.

“Well, we were in a hot place.”

“And then you became frustrated and made that comment about Mr. Pang’s bald head,” Steele pointed to Wolfe

“I did not!” Wolfe yelled.

“Yes, you did, you whispered it to me and said his head looked like a sweaty end of a”

Mr. Pang leaned on his cane and stood up.

“Enough! You act like children; obviously neither one of can understand the lesson being taught. Be gone!”

Both shrugged their shoulders and headed out the door to the showers. They walked past the lockers and into a wide-open space where the showers are located. Wolfe grabbed his shower kit. Shower stalls had a divider that comes up to their shoulders. They both hit the cold-water knob after the sweathouse of the sauna.

“Wow, that cold water feels good,” Wolfe leaned back into the water,

“Pang is a piece of work, who understands his Zen mumbo jumbo?” Steele mimicked putting a curse on Wolfe by shaking his fingers at him.

“I don’t, but mornings aren’t my peak time. I can’t seem to shake this fog I’m in,” Wolfe slapped his head a couple of times

“What’s wrong missing your breakfast beer?” Steele laughed.

“Now that you mention it.” He pulled a towel over the shower kit and waved his hand over his towel like a wand. “Voila” He pulled a beer out and cracked it open.

“Ahhhhhhh, nectar of the gods. Want a drink?”

Steele leaned over to Wolfe’s stall in disbelief.

“You’re disgusting, is there any type of alcohol that you won’t drink? It’s 9am in the morning and you’re having a beer. You can’t tell me that you don’t have a drinking problem!”

“You’re wrong, I don’t have any problem drinking, it’s finding the time to drink that’s the real problem.” Wolfe took another swig of beer.

“When I see Toni, I’ll let her now that you’re breaking your contract and you’ll be off this picture!”

“Listen here cowboy,” Wolfe grabbed Steele’s arm as he tried to leave his shower. “The way I see it, this picture is a package deal, I go, and then the picture is through! We’re in this together. Capeesh?”

Steele eyes smouldered at Wolfe. “You are an asshole and you’re going to ruin my life again just like in my movie “Vengeance.” Wolfe chocked on his beer.

“That’s what this is all about isn’t it? That’s ancient history Steele, you and I were two young punks trying to break into the movie business. We both made our mistakes. Get over her.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you go through women like guns in your movies. Load them up and take aim at your next target without thinking about anybody but yourself. Angela didn’t mean anything to you.”

“How was I supposed to know you wanted her? You certainly didn’t act like you were a couple.”

“Oh, you knew, and you were there to scoop her up after we had our argument. You opportunistic bastard.”

“No one put a gun to her head Steele, maybe she just had enough of you.”

Steele pushed Wolfe backwards.

Don’t you understand, I really cared about her, more than any woman since then.”

“Bullshit! The only person you care about is yourself.”

“I’ll never know what would have happened because of you.”

Steele doused his head with water from the showerhead.

“You know what Steele, for what’s it worth I’m sorry. I’m sorry I slept with your girl. I’m sorry I ruined your relationship with her. But you know what, I can’t change anything about it now. It’s in the past, so leave it there. I’m a different person now, I’ve changed.” ‘

Steele laughed.

“You haven’t changed at all. You’re still a womanizing drunk who can’t make a decent action movie on your best day. But you are right about one thing, what’s in the past is over. I have gotten over you and her, but I won’t ever forgive you.”

“You need a drink a Steele, it will calm your nerves.”

“Hah, not all problems can be solved out of a bottle Wolfe. But I guess you haven’t figured that out yet.”

Wolfe looked at his beer bottle and talked to it as if it is a friend.

“There, there,” he petted the beer bottle, “our friend is so angry, you’d never let me down, would you my best bud?” He laughed and then waited a second. “What’s that?” He mimicked that the beer is talking to him and presses his ear against the neck of the bottle. Wolfe nods his head in agreement. “Yeah, I know, you’re my best friend.

Problem is the only time I can drink you is in front of this idiot. He just doesn't appreciate you like I do, your full-bodied taste, your long sleek design, and your ample

"Jesus, why don't the two of you get a room."

"I think he's jealous," Wolfe stared at the beer. "He didn't mean to be, we just came from a very hot place and he's just worried that's where he's going to end up."

"Hot, I'll show you hot!" he reaches for the water in Wolfe's stall to crank it hotter.

"Touch it and you'll have a Bud imprint on your forehead!"

Steele reached for the faucet while Wolfe raised his arm to throw the beer bottle.

A female's voice broke the stalemate.

"Hi boys, how's everyone getting along this morning?" Toni yelled from the entrance of the men's washroom. Both men froze.

"Great, hold on a minute," answered Wolfe, then whispered to Steele "Take the bottle, if Toni catches me, I'm toast!"

"Help you? You've screwed me over and you want my help, that's rich. Hey Toni!"

"Coming in ladies," as Toni's footsteps tapped on the tile floor.

"Hold on Toni!" Wolfe yelled

"Wolfe, it's not like you to be bashful. Besides I've seen it all, I had three brothers you know." She entered the locker room and was rounding the corner to the showers. Wolfe was desperate, he turned to Steele.

"If you don't take this beer, I'm going to tell Toni that you brought the bottle in to try to frame me. That might get you, "he pointed at Steele, "kicked off the movie."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me." Wolfe whispered.

"Give it to me, you stupid idiot!"

Wolfe thrust the bottle over the stall divider and into Steele's hands. Toni rounded the corner to see Wolfe reaching his hand into Steele's stall towards his waist. Steele appeared to be holding something. Toni stopped in amazement.

"Am I interrupting something boys?" She put her finger to her lips.

“No, not at all! We were just telling a joke, a manly joke, Ho Ho Ho,” Wolfe laughed. Isn’t that right Steele?

“That’s right Wolfe. Hahahahah.”

Both laughed in deep manly voices.

“Well now, I know something is going on for the two of you to be joking with each other.” Toni tilted her head to one side in puzzlement.

“Wolfe, look at me.”

“Yes, my dear?” He said with an innocent look.

“Are you doing something you shouldn’t be?”

“Not unless you care to join me!” Wolfe beckoned her into his shower stall.

“Okay you’re normal,” She turned to the other stall. “Steele?”

“Yesssss,” he stammered.

“Normally, what a man does in his own shower is own business, but are you holding something?” She saw his chest and head, but the shower stall obscured his arms, which are down by his waist.

“Nothing.”

“You shouldn’t put yourself down Steele, I’m sure your ‘package’ is not nothing.” Steele was mortified by Toni’s comment.

“Now wait a minute, I’m not touching myself if that’s what you’re thinking.” He lost his grip on the beer and it started to pour out. Toni looked below the stall and saw a yellow rush of liquid. She was disgusted.

“This was a mistake; I promise not to barge in on you guys in the showers again.”

The beer continued to pour faster. She walked away.

“Is it a man thing that you guys have to pee down the drain? You’re disgusting Steele. I’ll see you guys on the set.”

“But I’m not peeing, it’s, it’sahhhhhhhhh!!!!” Steele screamed in frustration as he realized he can’t tell the truth without incriminating himself. Toni exited out the door to the men’s change room and disappeared into the hall. Steele looked at Wolfe with hatred in his eyes.

“That’s it, I will not cover for you again. I’ll take my chances; if you get kicked off this movie, I’ll persuade her that I can finish it without you.” He pushed a finger into Wolfe’s face.

“Relax Steele, I just wanted to say thanks.” He held out his hand for Steele to shake. Steele looked at it and walked pass grabbing his towel. He left the shower to go the change room and placed the beer bottle by the garbage can. Wolfe followed and picked up the bottle. He cradled the beer bottle and then talked in a lower tone to the bottle again.

“I’m sorry buddy he didn’t mean to waste you. Never again, you’re number one.” He tried to take one last drink, but the bottle is empty. He saw himself in the mirror. His smile turned to a frown as he realized that he is slowly losing the battle with the bottle.

Chapter 4

Last Action Hero

Day 2 – The movie set

9am

After the showers, Steele, Wolfe and Toni jumped into a golf cart that drove them to their set on the movie lot. After passing through security, the three of them entered the side door of a huge sound stage. Toni marched Wolfe and Steele to the green screen background where numerous wires and cables hung from the catwalk above. The studio was a hive of activity with several sets of jungle interiors, rock faces and even a river flowed through the center of the warehouse, all needed for the shooting of the movie. Toni pointed out a large man in the distance talking to several crewmembers.

“Okay that’s your stunt coordinator, he going to show the intricacies of doing your own wire work.”

“Explain to me to me again why we are doing wire work anyway? Where is the action in flying around like a fairy?” Steele gestured with his hands in a wing motion.

“Whoa, who woke up the dinosaur? Don’t you see what the young punks are doing these days? It’s acrobatics man, it’s making amazing leaps and kicks that defy gravity.” Wolfe gestured as if he is making flying kicks.

“And I suppose you have incorporated this into your movies, Mr. Flying Tiger?”

“Well I’ve been meaning to; I just haven’t been able to coordinate a day to put my plan into action. I always end up letting the stunt double do these scenes.”

“Which sounds like a perfectly good idea to me, Toni.” Steele looked hard at her. Toni doesn’t budge.

“The budget on this movie doesn’t allow for you to unload your scenes onto your stunt doubles. Each scene without you has to be specially shot, special effects to cover your double’s face and so on. To do this movie, you guys have to do all but the most difficult stunts.”

“Listen Toni, you’ll have no movie if I break my neck up there,” Steele grabbed at his neck and pointed at the cables.

“Relax, it’s perfectly safe, you have nothing to worry about. They have taken all proper safety precautions. Toni paused, “besides, I have big insurance policies on the two of you in case something goes wrong.”

“Toni!!!” cried Wolfe.

“I’m joking. Here comes the coordinator, he doesn’t take any nonsense from actor types, so be good boys.” Toni strolled off of the set. The coordinator was a big man, a powerhouse; same height as our actors but much broader. He talked with a deep, raspy voice.

“The name’s Nash and I am going to make you two ‘ladies’ push yourself harder than you’ve ever been worked before. Have either one of you done many of your own stunts?”

“You bet!” they shouted in unison.

“Of course!” Nash looked at them surprisingly. “That’s funny,” he said, “the little lady over there,” Nash pointed to Toni who waved,” says the two of you always pawn off the hard work to your stunt team.” Both actors looked at each other.

“Well sometimes.”

“But only if I think it’s dangerous,” stammered Wolfe.

Nash frowned. “Just what I thought. The two of you have been spoon fed by your teams for too long. You should be ashamed of yourselves; you’re giving stuntmen everywhere a bad name! Now you will be doing it my way.”

Nash pulled two cables hanging down from the ceiling. As he unwired the harness, Nash cut himself on the sharp serrated edge of the clasp. He looked at the cut with disdain but continued to unloop the cable.

“Aren’t you going to bandage your finger before you bleed all over the place,” commented Steele. Nash casually gazed at his hand and stuck his finger in Steele’s face, “I don’t have time to bleed.” He continued to unravel the wires.

“Can’t we find one normal person to work with on this movie?” Steele shook his head.

“Don’t knock him, Nash’s got better lines than half the writers for my movies,” said Wolfe.

Several minutes later, Nash was strapping both men into their harnesses. Wires jutted out from the harness in all directions, which attached into complicated grip mechanisms in the ceiling. Wolfe was hanging completely off the floor, his legs unable to touch the ground. Steele was in a more compromising position, with his butt high in the air but his face barely above the ground.

“How are you making out?” Nash slapped Steele on the back.

“Well it sure would be a lot easier without you talking to my ass. Can you adjust this cable?” Steele complained.

“Not so fast Nash,” Wolfe tried to get some momentum to swing over to Steele, “I’m in the perfect opportunity to . . .” Wolfe swung towards Steele and just barely reached Steele’s butt with his foot.

“Kick your ass!!!! Hahhahahah.” Wolfe laughed hysterically but Steele was not amused.

“That’s the only chance you’ll get.” Steele looked at Nash. “What are you waiting, fix my line!” Steele’s hand pulled on the line that was lowering his face to the floor.

“Don’t mind Steele, he lacks social graces.” Wolfe looked back at Steele.

“Really, it would seem to me that the last thing you want to do is piss off your stunt coordinator.” Nash walked over to Steele and examined the harness in detail, not saying a word, fuelling Steele’s frustration. Nash purposefully tightened the belt a notch too tight over the crotch causing Steele’s face to redden.

“Let’s stay nice and tight, I wouldn’t want you to fall out and get hurt, now would I?” Nash said with a smirk.

“Oww, you’re killing me, it’s too tight!”

Nash cupped his hand over his ear. “Did you say its needs to be tighter?”

“Yea, Nash, I think that’s exactly what he said,” Wolfe yelled.

“Enough, I’m going to pass out, please loosen it!” Steele was kicking his legs in the air from the discomfort.

“The word ‘please’ will do wonders.” Nash loosened the strap and Steele starts to breathe again.

“Okay, now that the fun and games are over, I want to make myself perfectly clear, on this set, all dangerous stunts will be planned and

coordinated by me.” Nash pumped his fist over his chest on the word ‘me’. Anyone have a problem with that?” He looked at Steele

“No.”

“No sir,” added Wolfe

“Good, it is my job to train the two of you to do as many stunts as you can. This will help the production save time and money. Hell, I believe it adds more realism to the picture. Nothing like doing your own stunts. Right Wolfe?”

“Hey, you’re talking to a former stunt man, I did some amazing stuff starting out.”

“What stunts have you done lately?” Nash asked. Steele edged closer to hear Wolfe’s reply. Wolfe thought for a moment.

“I did a complicated car chase in my movie ‘The Last Gunman’ where I had to jump out of a car and into one moving in the opposite direction.”

“Bullshit!” Steele yelled. “We both know your stunt double did that. You haven’t tried anything complicated in years.”

“Well I did some practice drills in case the stuntman got hurt and couldn’t execute the stunt.”

“You’re so full of crap Wolfe.”

“Shut up Steele, at least I try. You’re so above the rest of use you never even bother trying to practice any stunts anymore.”

“I can do anything that any stunt person can do.”

“I’m sure you can. I can tell both of you are capable enough,” commented Nash. “I’m sure you’ll want to do as many dangerous stunts as you can.”

“Dangerous

“Stunts?”

“But of course, didn’t Toni tell you that for this picture we’re going to really push the envelope. Your movie’s going to be renowned for its action sequences.” Nash slapped Wolfe on the back.

“Hell, I need a drink,” quipped Wolfe.

“Oh, rule number one, no drinking before or after stunts, at least for two hours. Booze pollutes the mind and I need you guys to have an edge out here.” Nash pulled down on a cable above Steele to test its strength.

“Wolfe has a hard time performing without not thinking about alcohol. I bet if you put a beer bottle in front of his face it would really motivate him.” Steele gestured his hand in front of Wolfe like a carrot in front of a horse. Nash shook his head.

“I need your full compliance in this guys, I mean one small mistake could cause an excruciatingly painful death. Or worse.

“Worse?” Both heroes looked at themselves. Nash smiled.

“You’ll find out.” He walked around them and checked the cables. “Now that we’re all set, let me explain the rules.” Both heroes hung in the middle of a stage surrounded by fake foam rocks. The rocks form different levels of elevation, surrounding them on three sides with Nash and the crew watching from the fourth side. Nash points to a bull’s-eye at both ends of the stage hooked into the wall.

“This is your target, strike your body as close to the bull’s-eye for points. The closest to the bulls-eye wins. This exercise is meant to help develop your coordination.”

“You mean all I have to do is run in this harness and hit the center of the target with my fist or foot?” Nash nodded. “This is too easy,” laughed Wolfe. Nash motioned to several stagehands that stepped to the side of the stage. Their hands rested on the ends of the cables. Both Wolfe and Steele stared at each other in trepidation. Nash looked at the actors with a grin.

“Let the training begin.”

Wolfe won the coin toss. He sized up the target, taking a running start and spun a martial arts kick directly towards it. As he jumped into the air the cables take him off the ground. He goes up. And up. And his front leg keeps going up, 30 degrees, 45 degrees until his leg is pointing vertically in the air. Wolfe body slams into the wall missing the target and his body was facing up rather than towards at the target.

“Ouch!” He bit his lip and sank to the ground.

“Ha,” laughed Steele.” Great aim if you’re trying to hit the ceiling.”

“I’d like to see you to do better, big man,” Wolfe yelled from the floor.

“Good try.” Nash replied as his crew moved cables on Wolfe correct the angle of his body.

“You must direct your body, arms, legs, everything towards the target. If you overcompensate then that body part will get pulled up. Understand?” Before Wolfe could comment, Steele interrupted.

“No problem, leave it to the pros. I’ll show you how it’s done!”

Steele had a look of intense concentration on his face as he took a sprinter start and exploded into a run while doing a spinning back kick in the air. The first spin is perfect and Steele grinned. The second spin is almost as good as the first. Then he spun again. And again. Instead of his foot, Steele’s head goes straight to the target and smacks dead centre in the Styrofoam target. Wolfe and the others burst out laughing.

“Way to use your head, superstar!” He rushed up to Steele whose head is stuck in the target. Nash and a few other crewmembers also slowly approached.

“Nice start, but you can’t overcompensate on a twist kick like that. It’s all right though, beginner’s mistake,” commented Nash.

“Beginner’s mistake!” Steele yelled from the target. “I’ve been doing action movies for fifteen years. Who are you calling a beginner, you lousy stuntman?”

Nash motioned to the stagehand to not disengage Steele from the cables.

“I’ll only say this once.” Nash whispered menacingly into Steele’s ear. “I’m here to teach you to do complicated wire techniques. I’m the only thing preventing you from not getting seriously hurt. Just because I haven’t starred in ten movies doesn’t make me any less important to this picture. At the end of the day, if you want to walk away from this set alive, you better listen to me. Do you understand?”

Steele is red as a beet. “Yesssss,” he strained.

“Drop him,” he motioned to the stagehand. Steele landed in a heap. Nash stared at Steele. “This ‘lousy’ stuntman is taking a break.” Nash looked around the set.

“Everyone take five.” The crew dispersed murmuring about what has taken place. Wolfe unclipped himself from the harness and walked over to Steele.

“Way to go Mr. Personality, your record is intact. Another person pissed off by your insensitive whining. It’s a miracle you’ve made a picture where someone hasn’t tried to kill you.” Steele was fighting to disengage himself from his harness.

“Just leave me alone.”

“You know what, I keep thinking it’s all an act, no one can be this much of an asshole for real! Maybe you are an incredibly gifted actor.”

“Ah, go take another drink”

“You know what’s difference between me and you, Steele.”

“I’m not a lush?”

“Someday, I’m going to control my drinking problem, but you’ll never stop being an asshole.” Wolfe released one the cables causing Steele to dangle down headfirst unable to clip out. Wolfe walks away.

“Wolfe come back here, get me out of this right away. Somebody help me!” Steele hung in the air, blood rushing to his head, as he demanded for someone to let him down.

15 minutes later after the break

Everyone on the set is gathered around Nash including Steele and Wolfe.

“Okay, has everyone had a chance to cool off?” Nash looked at Steele who is rubbing his wrist but doesn’t interrupt. “Now we are going to do some group exercises. A chance to work together and coordinate your skills.”

“Can I hit him?” Wolfe pointed at Steele.

“I said work together!” Nash raised his hands his frustration.

“Well if he is going to hit me, can I hit him back?” Steele asked.

“There seems to be an issue between the two of you that needs to be worked out. Now!” Nash remarked.

“You don’t say” Wolfe added.

“Sarcasm aside, there seems to be only one solution to your mutual problem,” He pointed to an assistant – “Franco, can you throw over that duffle bag?” Franco grabbed it and tossed it over. Nash pulled out punching gloves and headgear.

“If the two of you are so hot to duke it out with each other, who am I to stop you? Come over and put this gear on.” Steele and Wolfe stepped over to the equipment. Two assistants on either side of them help lace up and tape their gloves on. Large vests are place over the chest of each actor. Nash sticks a bull’s-eye sticker with a plastic baffle squeaker underneath on the centre of their chests.

“I think I’m going to love this,” Steele grinned.

“Not as much as when I knock the taste out your mouth,” Wolfe sneered.

“Listen,” Steele put himself into the face of Wolfe. “When we fight, there will be only two hits. Me hitting you,” he punched his chest, “and you hitting the floor.” Steele slapped his glove to mimic the fall. They both snarled at each other face to face until Nash stood between them.

“If you guys are done trading corny action lines, I’ll lay down the ground rules.” He pointed to the stagehands “Strap them in”. As they strapped the cable harnesses on again, Nash directed like a referee before a big fight.

“Points are scored by hits to the center of the body. No low blows or hits to the head. See that target on your chest?” Nash touched the bull’s-eye on Wolfe’s shirt padding. Both men nodded.

“Hit it hard enough and it will make a sound,” he punched Steele hard in the chest to demonstrate and the baffle made a squeaking sound. Steele stepped backward from the blow.

“That’s the only time I’ll get hit,” said Steele as Nash continued with his guidelines.

“Another thing, the cables have springs that enable you to jump over, spin and evade blows. Use them correctly and you can avoid punches all day. Best two out three punches wins. Any questions?”

“Yea, just one, what’s at stake, what’s the prize for the winner?” Steele asked.

“How about free drinks for the victor?” Wolfe laughed.

“That’s a big surprise coming from you,” replied Steele. “But, you’re on. You’ll never beat me!”

They hit gloves and their cables are rotated into the ceiling of the set. The set had been changed to look like a small arena with varying depths of walls and floors all made out of fake stone.

“Dante! Hit the music!” Nash yelled into the gloom of the overhead booth. Speakers behind them hit a solid drumbeat meant to add some adrenalin.

The battleground is ready!

A spotlight turned on to the left, Steele stepped into it, fists down, head up.

A spotlight turned on to the right, Wolfe stepped out, fists out, a grin on his face.

“Go!” yelled Nash.

The fight began, both men took running starts towards each other, the space between them diminishing in seconds. Wolfe jumped into the air to kick Steele in the chest. Steele anticipated and blocked with his hands, which propelled him to a higher elevation on a nearby wall. The block caused Wolfe to twist around 180 degrees, he quickly checked to make sure no cables were twisted. Steele used this split second to make his attack. He rushed into a running leap, his fists out to strike Wolfe. Wolfe twisted a forward flip to evade the punch as Steele’s body hit the background.

“I think I’m starting to get the hang of this,” Wolfe admired his agility just as an overhang popped into his flight, hitting him in the head. The impact caused him to flip head over feet and slam into the wall. Wolfe shook his head and heard Steele’s war cry from behind.

“Oh no,” murmured Wolfe.

He turned around straight into Steele’s oncoming kick.

“Squeak!”

“I gotta ya loser!” yelled Steele as he dropped to the ground after the impact.

“You got nothing, the wall overhang got me, and you just picked up the scraps.” Wolfe jumped down to a fighting stance.

“The score is 1-0 for Steele,” Nash yelled. Both men ready themselves into their fighter’s poses. Nash dropped his right hand.

“Begin!”

Steele took off to another running start, he was pumped after his last hit. Wolfe stood still, head down, fists out; a defeated target. Steele was charging closer, yet Wolfe doesn’t move.

“Hah, this guy has given up. I took more out of him than I thought,” commented Steele. He spun a flying kick at Wolfe’s chest. Wolfe looked up at the last second with a huge grin on his face and moved slightly to the right to miss Steele’s advancing kick. Steele’s intense look changed to shock as he slammed into the wall behind Wolfe. Dazed, he spun around to the fist of Wolfe who punches Steele right in the chest.

“Squeak!!!” Steele’s chest sounded off.

“Point for Wolfe!” yelled Nash. “The score is tied.”

“Nice fake” Steele gritted his teeth at Wolfe. Wolfe is surprised.

“Hold on, is that a compliment from you?” Wolfe mocked. “I apologize Steele, you actually can notice someone besides yourself. Bravo.” Wolfe clapped his hands in a slow and deliberate sarcastic gesture.

“Have a good laugh, you won’t sucker me twice.” Steele turned his back and walked away.

“Thanks for the advice, remember when I win, you know what beer I drink.”

Steele flipped Wolfe the universal signal.

“Gentlemen, mark your positions,” Nash signaled as both men stood in anticipation, ready for the word to strike.

“This is the rubber match, winner takes all! Show me what you got!”

Steele stepped forward first, and then stopped, watching Wolfe. Wolfe moved forward one-step and then stopped, watching Steele. Neither took another step, not wanting to be the one who will make a mistake.” Nash looks exasperated.

“You have two minutes before I have to call this a draw!”

Both stars looked at Nash and then launched themselves into action. They charged towards each other in a game of chicken to see who will move first. A split second before collision, both combatants turned in opposite directions. Steele went high, jumping onto the balcony of one of the walls. Wolfe jumped below obscured by the stones of the outcropping.

“One minute and thirty seconds,” yelled Nash.

Steele leapt down towards Wolfe. Wolfe jumped over his head and onto the balcony where Steele had just come from.

“You can’t win by avoiding me Wolfe,” spit Steele.

“Actually, I just wanted higher ground so I could do this!”

He ran at the wall and then spin kicked backwards right at Steele’s head. Steele was alarmed and tried to duck the kick. He succeeded but Wolfe tangled one of his feet around Steele’s cables.

“One minute left!”

Steele laughed at Wolfe who was trying to disengage himself from Steele's cable.

"Time to go for a ride" Steele jeered and jumped off in the opposite direction. This action pulled Wolfe behind him ensnaring him even more in the cables.

"Got you now!" said Steele. He swung at Wolfe who leaned to the side to evade the punch.

"Not so fast, two can play at this game." Now that he was firmly caught in Steele's cables, he found solid footing and jumped away pulling Steele behind him.

"Hey cut that out!"

"Watch it you two, those cables are expensive," yelled Nash.

Wolfe stopped and Steele slammed into the wall entangling them both further.

"All's fair that ends fair, buddy." The two of them were firmly ensnarled in each other's cables and every motion made it worse.

"Thirty seconds!"

"I'll get you yet!" Steele swung at Wolfe only to get his arm caught in the cables. Both throw several punches making the situation worse.

"Looks like it's going to be a draw after all," said one crewman to Nash.

Neither Wolfe and Steele were able to get either feet or fists free to hit the bullseye on the other's chest. It was stalemate.

Wolfe had a thought. His arms or legs weren't free, so Wolfe used the only part of his body that wasn't tangled. He swung like a pendulum, pushed back and leaned headfirst very lightly on Steele's chest. His head tapped the bull's-eye on Steele's chest.

"Squeak" it weakly sounded.

"Time!" yelled Nash. "The winner is Wolfe, by a head." Nash raised Wolfe's hand in victory. Steele was furious with himself.

"No fair, his punch was so weak it barely registered. I want another chance." Nash shook his head.

"A strike's a strike no matter how weak the squeak." Nash signaled to the crew "All right everyone, fun and games are over, Let's wrap it up and move onto the next scene. The crew spread out in different directions; leaving Steele and Wolfe to untangle themselves.

"Don't forget our bet," Wolfe pointed at Steele.

At that moment, Steele's cable disengaged from its tangle and his head swung straight into Wolfe's groin. Steele was ready to lose it from this latest humiliation as Wolfe pushed him away.

"I need a drink!" moaned Steele.

"Now you're talking Steele," smirked Wolfe.

Chapter 5

Road House

Evening- The Cage Nightclub

10pm

The Cage Nightclub was an exclusive bar for stars and their entourage. Entry was by invitation only. The bar was a trendy hot spot with expensive drinks and indecent cover charges. The music was loud with red and green spotlights flashing on and off around the dance floor. The bar was on two levels, on the upper level along the balcony railings are cages where couples could dance on their own above the crowd. Wolfe and Steele were at the bar to the side of the crowd, watching the women troll by. Wolfe was in his element, occasionally waving and slapping hands with other patrons and having a good time. Steele seemed more uncomfortable, as if he hasn't been in a bar for a very long time; he rubbed at his glass and looked at his watch. Wolfe noticed his discomfort and took another drink of beer. Steele shook his head in disgust.

"You better hope that Toni or Pang don't see you right now or your action career would be over."

"Wouldn't you like that Steele? Don't be sour because you had to buy my drinks tonight. Besides, I'm not worried, Toni's busy with family commitments tonight and do you think Pang would be caught dead in a place like this?"

Steele continued to fidget. "Are you almost done Wolfe, I'm ready to head out."

"Relax, Steele what's the rush? Do you see what is around us?" He pointed to the room of beautiful patrons.

"Of course. Are telling me I'm blind?" Steele stood up, angry by Wolfe's comment.

"Whoa, don't get all offended, I just noticed that you're in a room full of beautiful women and you hardly give them a second look. What's your problem?" Wolfe asked.

"Why bother when as soon as I meet someone, you're going to steal her away from me anyway."

"I can tell why you can't meet anyone; you think you're already lost the woman before you even talk to her. You need some help."

“Thanks, Freud, for your diagnosis, next you’ll be telling me you actually care.”

“Well, I haven’t had that much to drink.” Wolfe signaled the bartender for a refill. “Seriously though, you need to move on. Even a narcissistic jerk like you has got to have an equal out there somewhere.” Wolfe gestured to the crowd around them. “Of course, you have to think of something nice to say for once.”

“I suppose the great Wolfe Neilson will give me tips on how-to pick-up women. I can manage on my own.”

“Well, you’ve been really successful so far tonight,” Wolfe added sarcastically.

“Get off my case, you can’t go two minutes without a drink. I think your blood has a permanent alcohol level in it.”

“Now hold on a second, whenever I want, I could quit anytime I chose. What’s the problem anyway, a few drinks aren’t going to kill me.”

“A few drinks, Wolfe you almost drank you’re career into oblivion. Someday your liver will give up and you’ll wash away; then the whole party will be over.”

Wolfe gave his best-depressed face.

“Wow, you sure can kill a party mood. What do you do for an encore?” He stared at his glass and swished the booze around. In the reflection of the glass, a beautiful woman’s face appeared.

“Hello!” Wolfe exclaimed as he turned to face her. In front of him was a tall blond with long curly hair wearing a red dress that left nothing to the imagination. Beside her was a slightly shorter but no less beautiful raven-haired model with pouty lips. She hid behind her blond friend as if waiting to see what her friend would say.

“I told you, April, that’s him, I know that chin anywhere,” the blond said to her friend. “Are you Wolfe Neilson, the action star?” she coyly asked.

“In the flesh,” Wolfe turned his charm on maximum. Steele cringed. The dark-haired girl looked past Wolfe towards Steele. She nudged her friend.

“I think that’s Steele Taylor beside him” she giggled. Steele stood.

“This is an exclusive club and I paid good money not to be harassed. Would an autograph get rid of you?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pen.

“It’s definitely him Julie, he’s mean just like the tabloids said,” April laughed. Wolfe spit out half of his drink; he poked Steele in the ribs.

“You’re adoring public knows you only too well Steele.” He motioned to the women to sit down.

“Excuse my friend, he’s practicing his lines for his scenes tomorrow and he gets carried away in his character. Won’t you join us for a drink?” Both women sat at the bar, Julie faced Wolfe while April sat next to Steele.

“So, what brings you lovely ladies here tonight?” Wolfe looked into Julie’s eyes.

“Well,” replied Julie, “I just had a try out for a modeling agency while my friend April had an audition for a new sitcom called ‘Playing Around’. If it gets picked up it, it will air this fall.”

“I’ll count the days until it’s released,” Steele added sarcastically.

“Can I get either one of you beautiful ladies a drink?” Wolfe motioned to the bartender for two cocktails. April looks at Wolfe’s drink.

“Aren’t you always in detox? Should you be drinking?” Julie’s concern was genuine. Steele snorted in pleasure that Wolfe’s faults are as widely publicized as his.

“Don’t believe everything you read my dear.” He shot Steele a look.

“Are you ladies here on your own tonight?” Both girls looked around. April pointed at a balding man with about thirty extra pounds flashing his card to two women sitting at a table.

“No, we’re with him. He’s a Hollywood producer and thinks both of us have talent to appear in movies.”

“I bet he does,” Steele smirked at the obvious false promises of a typical Hollywood producer. April was intently looking at Steele. He smiled from her obvious look of attraction to him. “I follow a strict regiment of nutrition supplements that I eat to keep this shape. My body is a temple that you may worship. Feel my bicep?” said Steele. He flexed his arm like a schoolboy trying to impress a girl at the beach.

April was unfazed. “I was just thinking how much smaller you look than in the movies.” Steele’s jaw dropped while Wolfe almost spit out the rest of his drink from laughing so hard.

“I’ve had enough of this. Why don’t you take your little bimbo friend and go back to the producer who is pretending that you have an ounce of brains and talent.” Steele waved his hand as if to dismiss them. Both girls immediately stood to leave.

“You’re heartless,” April said to Steele. “Come on we’re going,” April motioned to Julie. Julie hesitated for a moment as if to stay with Wolfe but reconsiders after seeing the look of anger on April’s face. The two girls walked back to the producer who welcomed them with open arms. He said something and they laughed as they pointed back at them.

“What’s wrong with you Steele, can’t you play nice for five minutes. No wonder you haven’t meant anyone since Angela, you can’t stop talking about your number one fan, yourself!”

“Don’t bring up her name again! You don’t know anything about me. You’re lucky, you live like your characters. When the camera stops rolling you don’t stop acting. People love you because you’re just like the characters you play. You don’t know what is like to constantly disappoint fans that thought you were stronger, bigger, better looking, more charming than your character in the movies. You don’t have to worry about disappointing your fans expectations. People don’t really care about me so why should I care about them! I’ve had enough, I’m leaving.”

“Hold on a second, we’re not done here. You’re finally making some sense.” Wolfe grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Hands off drunk,” Steele pushed him off and causing Wolfe to spill his drink behind him.

It landed into the face of a very unhappy customer; a man they had just seen the other night. Right into the face of Blaze Vansome.

He said nothing while he wiped the liquid off his face. Vansome looked behind him to his massive identical bodyguards.

“Look,” Blaze motioned to them, “these two old men have just made a huge mistake.”

Wolfe and Steele gazed up into the blank expressions of the faces of the very large bodyguards formerly known as the wrestlers, 'Crash' and 'Burn'. Blaze continued his mocking commentary.

"Well, what we have here; two has-been action stars. Imagine, fossil remains right in front of us."

"Good one," nodded Crash.

"You know," Blaze wandered around Wolfe and Steele while talking to his bodyguards, "These guys really were something in their day, let emphasize the word 'WERE'. Now look at them," Blaze pointed at Wolfe, "one is such a lush, he screws up most of his scenes," then Vansome turned to Steele, "while the other one is such an asshole that no one will work with him.

"Wow this is quite an honour. I haven't had the pleasure of your company since you backed me up in my old military movie, 'War Hero.' Are you still as good a stuntman as you were then? Oh wait, that's right you never finished that movie!" Wolfe commented.

"No thanks to you. Did you ever listen to my suggestions to improve your movie? Never. You were too busy chasing chicks or chasing the bottle. No time to help out a fellow stuntman. That's okay, I succeeded in spite of you."

"Way to go Wolfe, looks like I'm not the only one who hates your guts," Steele stared at Blaze as if they now have something in common.

"That's the only thing we have in common, Steele. The two of you are losers, faded action stars. It's time to pass the torch and let the men of the new generation take over."

"Someday when you grow up, you tell me if your movies even approach my box office status," replied Steele.

"My box office gross is great, especially since my movies make the theatre instead of going straight to video, like you two old men," Blaze jeered. "Now, I want some payback."

"Relax, the spilled drink was an accident. Let me buy you a beer," Wolfe said.

"Don't bother, if you leave the club now, I won't put a beating on you!" Steele stepped into Blaze's personal space, causing the two bodyguards to tense their bodies for action.

"I'm not your dog, I don't leave when you speak and I don't sit when you bark," Steele curled up his lips on the word 'bark'.

“Good one, use that in your last movie?”

“No, never, I’ve been saving it for you.”

“Well, I have something very special for you too.” Blaze took off his jacket, ready to fight.

“Do you really want to get hurt? We’re all got movies to make, do you need an injury?” Steele pulled his fingers into a very tight fist.

“I guess the steroids haven’t eaten away all of your brains, you’re right. There is no need for me to fight.” Everyone relaxed. Blaze motioned behind him to his two bodyguards. “Take care of these old men.”

The bodyguards walked over to Wolfe and Steele. They were three to four inches taller and outweighed the action stars by considerable pounds. Steele peered up at Burn.

“You have a decision to make. You can stop now and enjoy your night. Or you take a punch and it will be the last thing you ever remember.” Steele pointed at his chin. “Go ahead, the first one’s free.” Burn spat on the floor and threw a haymaker to Steele’s jaw sending him sailing to the bar.

“I don’t get it, intimidation always worked in my movies,” Steele shook his head as Wolfe pulled him up.

“Reality check, Steele. This ain’t no movie,” replied Wolfe.

“I told you we should have left,” Steele barked as he and Wolfe went back to back facing the bodyguards.

“Yea, but then you would have missed all the fun!” Crash swung his fist as Wolfe ducked.

“I’ll take THE UGLY ONE,” Wolfe leapt at Crash’s chest and then fell back as if he hit a brick wall.

“They’re identical twins!” Steele tried to avoid Burn who grabbed him by the shoulders and tossed him across the bar onto a table. Steele stood and dusted broken glass off himself.

“I’m not having fun,” he yelled and threw a punch at Burn’s gut.

“You’re not having fun; this monster just spilled my drink!” Wolfe was tossed into the bar. He was mad and knew how to retaliate.

“All right, I’ve had enough” he marched towards Crash. “I may not be young and fast,” he leaned down” but I’m experienced and dirty.” He punched Crash right into the groin. Crash’s eyes went open wide,

stopped moving and tipped over onto the floor. He was writhing in pain and wasn't be getting up anytime soon.

"Wow, that was a fine example of sportsmanship" Steele yelled two tables over.

"But I got my man down," Wolfe replied.

"You just wait," Steele pointed at Burn. "Hey ugly! Are you coming or do I have to wait all day?" Burn raced to Steele who ran towards one of the dance poles. As he was about to run by it, he grabbed the pole, spinning behind Burn. Steele's kicked his feet into Burn's back using his momentum to shove Burn forward into one of the dancing cages. Steele jammed the door with a chair. Burn shook the cage door like a wild animal that was unable to break free.

"Not bad, which movie is that from?" Wolfe asked.

"'Iron Punch', but I was faster back then."

"Of course."

The crowd watching the fight began to separate and several policemen entered the doorway. Blaze watched the fight and was fuming. He looked at Wolfe and Steele.

"If you two touch me; I'll have lawyers take everything you own." He backed away. Steele and Wolfe turned to each other.

"Are you thinking, what I'm thinking," said Steele.

"You know I am," answered Wolfe

"I'll sue," yelled Blaze as he watched the two advance.

Both men leaned in to punch Blaze. Unfortunately, as they swing, Blaze ducks and both actors hit the police officer behind him. The cop fell like a dead weight to the floor. Both men stared at each other.

"I knew I should have left early," whined Steele as another officer latches handcuffs on his wrists.

Hollywood Police Detachment

1 am

Both actors appeared grim sitting in a communal jail cell with several other troublemakers. Steele was lying with his head in his hands. Wolfe was leaning on the bars looking out into the other cells. Steele leaned his head on the top bunk and closed his eyes. He heard a voice from behind him.

“Don’t go to sleep because I’m your worst nightmare,” whispered the voice. Steele, weary from his early fight, turned to meet his latest adversary only to look face to face with thin air.

“I am thinking you should look down, although small, I am amazing powerful for my size,” said the voice.

Steele peered down to see a tiny man no more than five feet tall of Indian decent. He shook his head lightly at Steele while he talked. The small Indian man might be hundred pounds sopping wet. The man’s face softened, and he smiled. He talked in a less threatening tone.

“You’re Steele Taylor, aren’t you?” he said in anticipation. “How was my acting?” The man puffed up his chest in a vote of confidence. “In my country of India, we make many action films, much more so than you Americans. We are a very talented people you know; did I make you believe I was going to hit you? Don’t be fooled by my size, I know many martial arts moves from watching your movies.” He stood in a very non-threatening stance but by the look of determination on his face he believed he is very powerful. Steele relaxed as realizes he’s met another armchair actor. Wolfe walks up from behind.

“He’s got my vote, want to use him in the big explosion finale?” Wolfe walked beside him.

“I don’t have time for someone’s acting dreams,” Steele replied.

The little Indian man frowned. Wolfe motioned behind the man for Steele to reconsider. Steele watched Wolfe’s gestures and then back at the little man. He changed his mind.

“What I mean is I don’t have the authority, but my agent will hook you up,” Steele awkwardly patted the man on the back.

“I’m going to be in an English movie,” he smiled to the other cellmates. “Praise my many gods for this fortunate moment of opportunity,” he twisted into a very comical martial move while jabbering away. Wolfe patted Steele on the back.

“Not bad Steele, you managed to turn asshole mode off for a moment, how does it feel?”

“Leave me alone Wolfe, we wouldn’t be here if we had left the bar when I wanted to.”

“Nobody forced you to hit that cop.”

“Don’t remind me, I think Blaze was going to piss himself laughing afterwards.”

“We did show his goons a thing or two, didn’t we?”

“I guess we did.” They laughed. The door to the booking area opened and Toni entered accompanied by a police officer. The cell erupted with hoots and hollers as the other men yelled their appreciation.

“Enough, you lowlifes, show some class,” replied Steele.

“Thanks a lot, both of you for waking me out of bed in the middle of the night,” Toni was fuming mad.

“Did we interrupt anything,” asked Wolfe.

“That’s none of your business! Do you know what kind of trouble the two of you are in? You both hit a cop, what were you thinking?”

“Listen Toni it was a mistake” started Steele.

“Mistake, that’s some mistake. You know better Steele; you can be a jerk but you’re not a troublemaker. You on the other hand,” Toni pointed to Wolfe, “I had better not smell any alcohol on your breath.” She pulled him closer to her by bringing her hands into the bars. Wolfe reeked of mints.

“Your mint breath doesn’t fool me, was it your drinking that caused this mess?”

Steele interrupted, “Toni it was Blaze Vansome’s fault, he started the whole thing.”

Toni calms down, “Really”?

“Well, we did spill a drink on him, but it was an accident.”

Toni sighed and shook her head. She looked back at the policeman.

“Officer, it’s against my better judgement but you can let the two of them out.”

The officer opened the cell door as Toni motioned them to leave.

“Come on Action Heroes, see if you can't make it home without getting into any more trouble.”

The three of them walked out; the little Indian man reached through the bars towards Toni.

“Excuse me my most attractive American woman,” he talked quickly in his Indian accent. I would like a part in your very next movie. Mostly likely a fighting role,” he posed in a fierce fighting stance that made laugh rather than be frightened.

Toni looked at Wolfe “What did you promise this guy?”

“It wasn’t me; Steele said he could act in our movie.” She looked at Steele with great surprise.

“Well I’ve never known Steele to recommend anyone to share the limelight with him, so you must be all right. Here’s my card,” she handed it to him.

“Whenever you get out of here, give me a call.” She walked on. The man grabbed Steele as he passed. “Thanks, my most friendly American movie star. My friends call me Hamesh. I too will be out soon as this is a simple misunderstanding about some merchandise I had purchased. I am a reputable dealer you know. I only sell the highest quality security items. If you ever need anything, and I mean anything,” he winked at Steele, “you give this most impressive Indian man a call.” He handed Steele a business card, which he put in back pocket.

“I doubt that will happen,” Steele said under his breath and caught up with the others. He looked back as Hamesh waved.

“What’s going on Steele, it’s not like you to make friends,” Toni asked.

“Never mind, how did you get us out of jail?”

“Well the two of you are lucky, apparently the officer is a big fan of both of you and agreed to drop charges. Oh, keep the 15th open, you’re both going to a birthday party for his boy.”

“Toni!” Steele yelled as the door to the precinct closed behind them.

Blaze’s mansion – Beverly Hills

1:30 am

High in the foothills of Beverly Hills, a large mansion was surrounded by other beautiful homes. The house and grounds had an iron gate surrounding the perimeter with several expensive cars in the driveway. Two large dobermans patrolled the fence. Blaze Vansome was extremely successful with all the trappings of success. He was rich with tons of fans and a who’s who line up of producers willing to do movies with him. But for someone with so much success, he was scared to death of losing it all. He had no friends and harboured a bitter grudge against anyone who’s wronged him during his career. After this evening’s events, he’s remembered Wolfe was at the top of that list. He never forgot how Wolfe brushed him off at the start of his career and

held him back. He had used it to motivate himself to succeed ever since.

In his backyard, Blaze was sitting in a hot tub with two well-figured blonds. Crash and Burn were nursing their wounds at an outside bar with bags of ice on their respective injuries. Vansome was screaming mad at them.

“How could you let those two action rejects beat you, I should fire your asses.”

“But Blaze, they were pretty fast for two older guys,” pleaded Burn.

“Yeah that one move Steele made on the pole was from the that movie 'Fist of something...’” Crash desperately tried to remember the movie.

“Oh, oh, I know what you mean, I saw it on video just a couple of weeks ago,” added Burn.

Blaze screamed, “Stop discussing their movies, I’m the action star now! People fill the theatres to see my movies. Fans talk about my stunts. Both of you are fired if I hear another word about their movies, understand?”

“Yes Blaze,” they said in unison.

“Good, now we have some matters to discuss” he looked at the two girls with a sleazy grin. Suddenly Crash yells and jumps up from his bar stool.

“Iron Punch, that’s the movie he pulled that stunt in.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Burn nodded in agreement. Then both men turned to face the cool icy stare of Blaze. They looked mortified as they realized their mistake. Blaze stood up in the hot tub.

“Enough, you bimbos have ruined my night.” The girls in the tub think Vansome is talking to them. Enraged, they leave the frustrated action star alone in the hot tub. Vansome tried to persuade them to come back.

“Not you bimbos, those bimbos!” He pointed to the guys. The girls cannot be convinced to stay and rush off to change into their street clothes. Vansome climbed out of the hot tub and put on his robe. “Who cares, there’s more where they came from,” he forgot about the girls. Vansome turned his focus onto the bodyguard brothers.

“Now the two of you are going to help me put those old has-beens out of the action movies. Permanently!” Both bodyguards looked at Vansome.

“How? Are you going mow them down with a machine gun just like your movies?” laughed Crash. Blaze glared at him.

“Do you know what I like about you Crash?” questioned Blaze. Crash was unsure of what to say in case he angered Blaze more.

“No.” Blaze scratched his chin as if to ponder the answer.

“That’s funny, I can’t think of anything either.” He slapped Crash in the head. “Now shut up and leave the thinking to me, we’re going to hit them where it hurts.”

“In the head,” said Crash with the ice pack to his head.

“In the balls,” replied Burn with the ice pack on his groin.

“No, you idiots, since the two of you can’t get it done; it’s time to call in a favour with someone who can.”

Crash made a face. “Favours like that tend to cost you Blaze.”

“Trust me, to put Wolfe and Steele out of business, I’d be willing to sell my soul.”

Chapter 6

The Matrix

Iron Dog Gym - the next morning

7:30 am

“Blocks, I hate blocks,” bellowed Wolfe.

Wolfe, Steele and Pang were in a workout room with mirrors on the left wall. There was a pile of blocks spread around the floor. Wolfe was lying on his side with a stack of thin wooden blocks balanced cautiously on each hand. Wolfe’s arms were starting to quiver from the strain. Mr. Pang pointed his cane at Wolfe and instructed Steele to place another block in his right hand. Wolfe almost dropped his blocks.

“Aww,” Wolfe screamed. “I hurt that hand last night, ease up!”

“You want to ease up on the screaming, Wolfe, the guys around the gym are going to think you’re a girl,” smirked Steele.

“Place another block in his right hand,” Mr. Pang instructed.

“If you say so,” Steele laughed and stacked another block.

“Ow, why are you doing this, do you think I enjoy pain?” Wolfe yelled at Pang.

Mr. Pang pointed at Wolfe. “Never tell your enemy your weakness or he will exploit it.”

“Enemy, who’s the enemy?” Wolfe looked around the room. The blocks are starting to waver in his hand “Is it you? Is it Steele? I certainly don’t like either one of you right now.”

“You are missing the point, what do you feel?” Mr. Pang asked.

“I feel pain, I hurt, I’m tired, and I’ve had enough!” Wolfe dropped all the blocks as they tumbled down to the floor. One from above his head smacked him on the forehead. Wolfe got an idea.

“Pang I think I’ve got it. I’ve finally figured out the lesson of all your exercises.” Pang looked curious.

“Well don’t keep us in suspense, what the hell is it?” asked Steele.

“The lesson is obvious isn’t it?” He picked up the block and pointed it at them. Pang awaited his answer.

“Wooden blocks can hurt like hell when they land on your head.” Wolfe paused and added, “Next time we should use nerf blocks?” Mr. Pang shook his head.

“You are too caught up with yourself and your problems. Expand your mind; try to imagine how your life affects others. Now go, your movie director awaits.” The two actors grabbed their towels and filed out of the workout room.

“Thanks for the great class Pang, I learned a lot watching Wolfe getting hit by a bunch of blocks,” Steele joked.

“Good, because tomorrow it’s your turn,” Pang added. Steele’s smile vanished and he turned to say something as they exited out the door. But Pang has disappeared from the room.

“Does this guy turn invisible at the end of every lesson? Where he’d go?” Wolfe shook his head.

“Can’t keep your mouth shut, can you Steele?”

“Least my mouth isn’t filled with a bottle most of the time.”

Wolfe glared at Steele as an assistant stopped in his golf cart to drive them to the nearby soundstage.

“I’m sick of your constant jabs at my drinking. I’ve handled my problem over the years; I don’t need people telling me how to live.”

“Those ‘people’ were probably only concerned about your health; you drink too much!”

“Like hell, I could go without a drink, anytime I want to.”

“Actions speak louder than words, prove it!”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you. If I get kicked off this picture, you’d be ecstatic.”

“Yeah, but at least I’m honest. You’re kidding yourself if you think you can quit cold turkey. You need help; you don’t have the will power to stop drinking. Don’t you care what happens to you?”

“And you care about me Steele? Coming from a guy who steps on people as a hobby.” Wolfe stared ahead as the assistant parked the golf cart. The assistant pointed to the set and both men start walking.”

“Tell you what, I’ll stop drinking if you stop being an asshole to everyone else on the set.” Steele looked over at Wolfe.

“And how the hell do you quantify that? Am I supposed to bow and grovel before everyone I meet?” He bent down before Wolfe. “Oh, great one, you are so wonderful, how may I serve you?” A crewmember walked by and does a double take on the scene.

“What the hell do you want?” yelled Steele. The crewmember was uncomfortable and moved on. Wolfe answered as Steele stood up.

“How about treating people like they’re human beings. Promise me that you won’t say anything that puts people down. Maybe you’ll start to think first and realize that you’re not the most important person on the planet.”

“So, if I’m Mr. Nice Guy, you’ll promise not to drink?”

“Not a drop.”

“And I just have to promise not to say anything mean to any of the idiots I work with.”

“Steele!”

“Relax, I won’t say anything to them, but you can be sure that I’ll complain to you”, Wolfe stopped Steele from walking.

“You think you got the will power to stop acting like poison with other human beings?” Wolfe questioned.

“You sure you got the will power to go without a drink and join reality with the rest of us?” returned Steele.

“I can definitely outlast you.”

“Care to stake your job on it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if I catch you taking one sip of a beer, wine, turpentine, anything remotely resembling alcohol; you’re off the movie and I get lone billing.”

“Let me get this straight, if I catch you insulting even one person, then you will bow out of the film.”

“Sure, but it’s not going to happen. When I put my mind to something,” Steele tapped his head, “there’s no way to break it. Besides you won’t last 24 hours without having a drink. I’ll have you off this picture before the next day of principal shooting.”

“You have yourself a deal,” replied Wolfe. They shook hands.

“Too bad this is the only day we’ll get to work with each other, since you’ll be sucking back a beer before the end of the day.”

“Unuh, that sounded like an insult to me, has this deal started yet?”

“Whoa there Wolfe, I agreed I wouldn’t insult anyone else on the set but you.”

“Figures, okay I’ll agree just because I can’t wait to see the look on everyone’s faces when you’re actually civil to them for once.”

“You won’t last the day without a drink.”

“Better not get to used to your trailer Steele, because by the end of the day you will have insulted somebody; then this whole picture will be mine.” Wolfe rubbed his hands in anticipation. As they turn the corner, they came face to face with Toni. She was standing with her arms folded and tapping her feet as she waited for the two of them to arrive.

“Are you guys still playing macho games with each other? I would have thought that last night’s activities would have smartened you up.”

“Toni, my love,” Wolfe put his arm around her as they walked. “We were just having a talk on willpower and today’s shooting, nothing to worry your pretty head over. As a matter of fact, you should stick around today, you may notice some changes for the better.” Toni shook her head and sniffed her nose around Wolfe’s face.

“You haven’t been drinking this morning; maybe you’re not making sense because of your lack of sleep. Is there something you want to tell me Steele?”

Steele smiled. “Wolfe’s right Toni, after today things are going to be so much better around here.” Toni stared at them.

“I don’t know what the two of you have hatched up and I don’t care as long as you both get this picture done. Now, I need to talk you about the director for your movie.”

“Yeah what’s up with that, we haven’t had any preliminary meetings with him at all and here we are at the first day of shooting,” Steele commented.

“Well he’s been shooting his last movie up until yesterday.”

“It’s not Steve Karpenter, is it?” Steele whined. “That guy is a total hack he’s ruined more of my movies than

“Why don’t you go insult him face to face,” said Wolfe.

“Hah, I bet you’d like that, I won’t go that easy.”

“We’ll see,” whispered Wolfe.

Exasperated, Toni spoke, “No Steele, its not Stephen. This director has a long list of popular movies.

“Who is it?” questioned Steele.

“He’s coming from a very long distance to work with the two of you.”

“Who is it?” wondered Wolfe.

“He’s even agreed to take a pay cut in exchange for potential revenues.”

“Who?” started Wolfe.

“Is It!?” asked Steele.

“Steele, Wolfe baby!!! Come on over and give me a big hug!!!!

They had walked onto the main set and were approached by a very small, thin, flamboyant man named Sven Anders. He was dressed in a powder pink shirt with ruffles and was covered in jewellery. He had a yellow scarf tied around his neck not for the cold but as his fashion accessory. He rushed up to the men. He grabbed Steele and kissed him on both cheeks. Steele’s eyes were wide with shock and his mouth hung open. Sven grabbed Wolfe and held his hand; Wolfe was frozen and couldn’t speak.

“Oh hi, Toni,” Sven dismissively looked over to her; obviously women were not his thing.

“Well,” Sven slapped his hands together in glee. “Are my two heroes ready to make the action movie of the century?” he said standing in a very feminine manner. Both men looked to Toni to be rescued.

Action Movie Set

15 minutes later

Steele and Wolfe had Toni cornered in a huddle, they were attempting to change her mind about her pick of a director. Sven was busy with stagehands and the second unit crew director organizing the day’s events. Steele moaned, “Toni, how could you not tell us about the director, this is a disaster!”

“I hate to agree with Steele, but he’s right. Sven’s a romance director, what the hell does he know about making action movies? I mean look at him Toni, he’s not actually a man’s man,” Wolfe shrugged.

“No, I think that’s exactly the problem,” Steele complained.

“Listen, both of you, Sven was not our first choice or second choice... but he’s a bankable Hollywood director; something neither one of you has had in a long time. We had Don Fearing attached to the project for the last month . . .”

“Now he’s an A-list director,” says Steele.

“Well you’re A-list director has dropped out because of creative differences. We had to scramble to find someone to fit our budget and schedule. Don’t let his appearance fool you; he’s done a lot of research on the two of you and the whole action genre. He has some terrific ideas of turning the whole lagging action movie genre on its ear. He has been looking forward to this opportunity for a long time.”

“Toni, he’s gay!! How the hell is he going to direct me to bash a guy’s face in when he’s too busy looking at my ass,” Steele whined.

“Why do you think he’s after you, I’m the one in better shape,” Wolfe posed.

“Jesus, will you listen to the two of you, every god damned thing is a competition with you. Now you’re fighting over a director’s affection!” Toni yelled.

They both stared down to the floor. Steele looked up first.

“Man are you sad!” Steele jeered at Wolfe.

Wolfe was about to throw a punch at Steele, but Toni intervened. “Enough, the two of you! Work out your differences and learn to work with Sven despite your homophobia. Don’t screw this up, do I make myself clear?” They both nod.

“Steele, you normally tear into every director in the first minute you meet them, and you haven’t said one rude thing to Sven, yet! What’s going on?” Toni inquired. Steele composed himself.

“I’m practicing some,” he looked at Wolfe, “restraint for the sake of the picture.”

Wolfe laughed. Toni turned to Wolfe.

“I don’t know what’s going on with the two of you, but I mean it. Be on your best behaviour or there is no picture. The two of you have one chance to make this work. Here comes Sven now.” Sven sashayed up to the two men.

“How are my two favourite action boys doing?”

“Ahhhh, great Sven, what’s our first scene?” asked Steele. Sven clapped his hands once.

“Always ready to jump in, you’re a real trooper Steele.” Sven slapped him on the back.

“Nash set the two of them up for the next scene.”

Nash, the stunt coordinator, entered from the left stage. He motioned to Steele and Wolfe to join him.

“Right, here’s what’s going to happen. Steele you’re about to be pulled off your feet by this metal chain. Wolfe, you step behind him and grab him for leverage to hold him back. Hold on to him for dear life. Any questions?”

“What if I let go, hypothetically?” asked Wolfe.

“Nothing, remember I have all safety concerns looked after. But he’s your friend in this picture and you want to save him. Hypothetically, your motivation is that you want him to live.”

“Great Wolfe, this will give you a great opportunity to act!” Steele responded.

“Let’s get going people,” yelled Sven.

“We’re ready here!” Nash answered.

“This is a dress rehearsal before we put this to tape.” Sven called out to the crew. A stagehand came out and snapped an electronic clicker for the take. “And action,” motioned Sven.

Steele reached for an iron chain attached to a large submarine door. The wind machine was blowing air and a mist of water sprayed on their faces to simulate the ocean. Steele was straining on the chain, which would open the sub door before it sank below the water. Wolfe jumped onto the sub platform and gingerly grabbed Steele around the stomach to pull the chain and unstuck the door. Sven stood up.

“Cut! Cut! That’s no good. You both look like you’re going through the motions. Do I have to show you two how to act!” he yelled in high-pitched voice.

“Going through the motions!” Steele exploded. “I’d like you to act this scene you son of” Wolfe pointed at Steele, as he was about to insult Sven. Steele recovered in time. “.....of a gun. That’s a good idea Sven, why don’t you come up here and show us how you want it done,” Steele took a deep breath and saved himself from losing the bet.

“That’s a good suggestion Steele, you’re really being helpful. I don’t know why people said you are hard to work with.”

Sven jumped out of his fluffy director’s chair and approached the two actors. “Wolfe you’re pulling too weakly, grab Steele like you mean it! Here let me you.”

Sven grabbed Steele from behind and Sven’s groin was tight behind Steele’s butt. Steele was horrified but afraid to move or say anything that could be construed as an insult.

“Steele you need to look like you are feeling terror, I want you to look really scared, as if your life’s in danger.” Steele’s face was a horrified mask for all the crew to see but wasn’t acting, it was brought on by Steele’s homophobic fear. Sven watched Steele’s face.

“That’s perfect Steele. Am I a great director or what? Places everyone for the next take,” Steele remained horrified and frozen to the spot.

“Is he a great director or what” Wolfe smirked.

“Try the Or What Category!!” grimaced Steele, realizing that he could only complain to Wolfe.

Above the set was a catwalk for electrical and lighting cabling. A door opened from a set of stairs and a blond man with spiked hair stepped into the corridor. He was dressed in coveralls with the name ‘OZ’ embroidered on the front. He carried a small brief case and walked down the catwalk while above the main stage. He acted like he knew what needed to be done. His demeanour was calm he doesn’t seem to belong here. He stopped at the cable junction which housed the cables for the wirework scenes. He removed a wire cutter from his briefcase and placed the blade over the apex of the cables. Carefully and quietly, two of the three primary cables were cut. He placed the wire cutters back into the briefcase.

“Look’s like someone’s going to take a tumble, mate,” he spoke in an Australian accent to no one and left the same way he came.

Action Movie Set

late afternoon

The crew were preparing for a scene involving the cables between Steele and several actors posing as thugs with guns. Nash set up a row of compressed air canisters along the floor to simulate a row of bullets that will miss Steele but impact the ground. Steele was strapped into his cables and ready for the scene. Too much dry ice had been used and the smoke was causing people to cough.

“Can someone turn off the smoke machine?” a gaffer yelled out to the stage crew.

Suddenly, someone emerged from the smoke in front of Steele. Sunglasses covered his cold eyes and he chewed a toothpick in his

mouth. Muscles bulged out of his army fatigues and there was a harness across his chest with the outline of grenades. His gun was a Brass Eagle rifle with auto loading magazine and sight. The rifle was aimed squarely at Steele's chest. The cable assistant stepped back with fear.

"Only one of us can work on this movie. Goodbye Steele." Wolfe fired the bullet into his chest. A crimson glob welled up on his shirt and dripped down. Steele touched his chest in disbelief.

"You shot me." The blood drained from his face; he felt his life ebbing away from his body. "Why?" he stammered.

"A thousand and one reasons Steele, but I only need one to pull the trigger," laughed Wolfe, he held a canister of small red balls and opened the gun canister. "Aren't these paint ball guns great, the vegetable oil dye washes right off. I've been dying to use one of these guns for ages."

The cable assistant sighed with relief that the gun isn't real. Nash shook his head.

"Wolfe, stop making a mess with the paintball guns, that's for later scenes. Can someone give Steele a clean shirt?" Nash pointed to one of his staff. Steele looked furious.

"I gotcha didn't I, you thought I was trying to kill you. Hell, I'd have to stand in line if I really wanted to do that," smirked Wolfe. Steele composed himself.

"Fooled me, no way! I'm mad because that was a dangerous practical joke, what if I ducked and you hit me in the eye and blinded me. If I wasn't strapped up right now, I'd come over and deck you."

"Relax, I'm sorry, I was just trying to have some fun. I forgot I was dealing with the most anal action star in history of the business."

"Anal", Steele yells as the assistant replaces his shirt. "Why don't you stick your rifle up your ..."

"Places everyone. Rehearsals are done, this one's for tape" Sven walked on stage and stood next to Steele.

"Are you all right there, big fellow?" Steele looked nervously behind him.

"Let's do it ahhh little fellow."

Sven slapped him on the ass "That's my Steele," and sat back in his director's chair.

"Wait a minute, the cables need to be tightened up," said Nash.

“Hurry up Nash, we need this scene done so we can go on to stage twelve.”

Nash adjusted the cable network taking some slack out of the lines, so they were taut and ready for the stunt. “We’re ready,” said Nash

“Rolling” the clicker snapped on the stage.

“Action,” yelled Sven.

Two thugs charged into the set, which was a mock nuclear plant operations center with large computer consoles and tanks with hydraulic piping. They moved around cautiously, searching for the action star. Steele stood on a platform above them, looking down. They saw him and pull out their guns, taking aim. Steele ran along the platform as they fired. Compressed air shot out clumps of dust and sparked fire trailing just behind Steele’s feet. He charged and leaped over the heads of both men.

Crack! The only cable holding Steele splintered, causing a twisting and crashing motion. It took his leaping momentum and careened him high against the wall like a bungee cord. The actors were frozen in place and Nash was too far to act. Only one person was close enough to help. Wolfe dashed towards the falling Steele.

“I got you!” screamed Wolfe. Wolfe dove through the air and landed under Steele before he fell to the ground.

Thud! Steele landed on Wolfe in a tangled heap. Wolfe was padded with his fatigues gear and succeeded as a landing cushion. Everyone rushes towards them. Nash was first.

“Steele, Wolfe! Talk to me, are you two all right?” Steele rolled over without saying anything. Wolfe rose and stood up heroically.

“No need to thank me,” Wolfe peered out over the staff, “for being a hero. I’m sure anyone would have made their body into a human cushion had they been closer.” Sven ran beside them.

“Nash, how could this happen? These stunts have to be safe, what the hell caused the cable to snap?” Sven yelled.

“I don’t know Sven, I personally double-checked and tripled checked the wires earlier today and this shouldn’t have happened.”

“Get some answers now!”

Nash left to go up to the catwalk.

“Get the medic over here,” barked Sven. Steele tried to rise.

“Do you hurt?” asked Wolfe.

“Only when I breath,” he groaned. Steele winced as he tried to put weight on his left arm.

“My arm, it feels like it’s broken. I’m in incredible pain. And I can’t blame anyone because of our stupid bet.” Steele grit his teeth. “Why the hell did you do that?”

“Just instinct Steele, I’m sure if I had thought about saving you, I never would have moved.” The first aid person leans over Steele trying to assess the damage. Steele yells in both mental and physical pain.

“This is horrible, now I owe you, of all people. What else could go wrong!”

The main doorway opened and the crew’s attention shifted from Steele to a beautiful woman in a tight jumpsuit. She stepped through the door oblivious to the accident that has just occurred. Despite the commotion of the near fatal accident, the entire set quieted down at her arrival. She was a tall, dark raven-haired beauty with a body that made men’s jaws drop.

She was ‘Madison Jones’, lead action heroine of over ten martial arts films. She would drop you on your butt if she wasn’t treated like a professional. She strode by the crew as they stared. She was notorious for being abrupt with her co-workers; she had a hot temper and no problem telling her peers when they were wrong. She was in her acting prime and had very successful box office results. Self taught by several different martial art disciples while growing up in Japan, she could match her male counterparts, blow for blow. She was a no-nonsense action heroine and she doesn’t get caught up in Hollywood trappings. Sven sauntered up to her and grabbed her arm.

“Sorry my dear, this is not a good time. There’s been an accident. Let’s go back to your trailer,” Sven directed her to the back of the set. They walked back the way she came in.

“No problem, Sven just so long as the boys,” looking back at Steele and Wolfe, “know that they are co-starring with me.” She pursed her lips.

“Co-star?” Steele and Wolfe looked at each other in a bewildered daze.

Chapter 7

Raiders of the Lost Ark

Wolfe was running for his life.

He found the entrance, a large jagged hole surrounded by thorny plants. He peered into the mouth of the cave and plunged into its darkness. His hands felt the smooth eroded rock walls while something ran across his hand. He ignited a match and its light illuminated a large hairy night crawler as it disappeared into the rocks. He went downward into the dark until a soft glow shined in the distance, guiding his quest. He stumbled through the cobwebs into the heart of the cavern. He had entered the treasure chamber.

His heart leapt into his throat at the sight of the riches; rubes, sapphires, precious gold moulded into various shapes, enough to make him a king many times over. Yet he was here for only one prize, a collection of gems whose hardness surpasses the strength of diamonds. The gems shined brightly at the far end of the chamber, shimmering in the sparkling stream. He bent down, watching and admiring their lustre. He reached for his pouch and scooped the precious gems into his leather bag causing the water to ripple.

So beautiful, he thought but costly, so many of his team had died trying to reach these stones. How was he able to survive while the others perished, maybe he was just a better survivor? As the reflection on the water cleared, Wolfe noticed movement a split second before a native threw his spear to where he was standing. Missing Wolfe by inches, he jumped sideways avoiding the sharp blade. The native leapt forward; his breath stinking of rotten teeth and his body covered with ceremonial tattoos of an African tribe. The native had incredible strength and slowly choked Wolfe's throat. Before oblivion could take over, he rolled the native into the stream, trying to pull his head under the water. They thrashed deeper and deeper into the water until the two of them were caught up the current. The stream undertow pulled them under, down deep below until the current's crushing weight pushed against their bones. Just as he felt his lungs were going to explode, the water rushed out of a rock opening spewing them onto the bank. Wolfe turned to his attacker only to find the native skewered by his own spear.

His footprints imprinted into the soft sandy shore as the river trickled down the bank. The land around the river was open with lush jungle foliage behind him. He wiped sweat from his forehead as he tripped over a bony hand sticking up from the bank. He crashed to the ground landing in the silt. He shook his head and wiped his mouth, spitting up mud. He stared into the bony abyss of well-devoured skull head. Chains shackled the arms and legs of the man pegged down to the riverbank. Drowning perhaps, but the bones were so white as if bleached and picked clean of meat. A flying spear interrupted his thoughts, landing inches from his leg. A native with a ring through his nose and tattooed face leapt out of the bushes tackling Wolfe to the ground. He pressed his feet into the native's chest and sent him flying into the river. Immediately, a large flurry of activity rippled in the water and the native screamed as hungry piranhas feed on his poor body. He struggled to rise from the river only to be pulled back to the feeding maw of the masses.

"I guess I won't be taking a swim," mused Wolfe.

From behind him, several other natives rushed from the foliage onto the sandy shore. Wolfe spied a possible crossing further down the river and dashed towards it. Wolfe ran towards a large fallen tree that crossed the river to the other side. The log was suspended well above the water's grasp, ten feet below. He carefully walked across the narrow branch, trying not to fall in the water below. The natives rushed behind him and one began to cross slowly behind Wolfe. He threw a dagger that stroke just below Wolfe's foot. Wolfe stopped and tried to pull the knife from the wood. Wolfe wiggled his finger at the native.

"Now I have the knife."

Wolfe smiled his confidence back at the native. He smiled back and gazed beyond Wolfe. Wolfe looked behind him and frowned at the natives advancing from the other side of the river's tree branch. He was trapped with only the hungry piranhas below him. The natives slowly advanced, one brought out a blowpipe and loaded an evil looking pin into the reed. Wolfe pulled a rope from his side pocket and attached to a branch on the bottom of the log. He watched two natives advance, the second native put a dagger in his hand and readied to throw at Wolfe's chest. The native on the other side put the reed to his mouth to blow the dart. Wolfe watched both ends, waiting for the best moment to react.

Neither native can clearly see the other end and prepared their simultaneously attacks.

The native threw his knife. The other native blew into his reed. Both the dart and dagger sail through the air bringing death ever closer to their target. Wolfe waited and then kicked off his right foot to jump into the water. As Wolfe fell beneath the log, both weapons of death pass unhindered thru the air to the next available targets. The dagger lodges itself deep in the heart of the native causing him to gasp. The dart found a home in the neck of the other native who gurgled a groan of surprise. Wolfe came face to face with the water but with the momentum he was able to swing 360 degrees around the log. He had trouble regaining his footing back on top and fell groin first to the log in obvious pain. Wolfe's impact on the log sent both mortally injured natives falling to their deaths into the river. The bubbling circles signal the feeding frenzy of the piranhas.

The other natives on the bank stared at each other and advanced slowly on the prone Wolfe, who straddled the log. A dull rumbling reverberated over the water. Wolfe pulled a leather pouch from his bag and hung it over the log above the river; as if the treasure it held will be lost to all of them. The natives hesitated as if wary of attacking Wolfe. One native stabbed the river, spearing a wriggling piranha and threw it at Wolfe. It narrowly missed him and fell back into the river. Several other natives stand by the river with spears ready to secure the bag that Wolfe may drop. The other natives advanced on Wolfe on the log. Wolfe released the rope preparing to fight. The native on the right pointed his spear at Wolfe's chest; Wolfe motioned him forward to make his last stand. The native jumped on the log causing Wolfe to fall towards the river.

Wolfe closed his eyes in anticipation of the piranha's sharp teeth; instead he lands on the deck of a boat. The pilot's head faces forward behind the plastic wind deck, which shielded him from the natives' spears. Several spears were thrown which Wolfe evaded as they land in the wooden floor of the boat. Natives continue their attack from the shore towards the speeding boat. The first one tried to land in the boat and missed, falling into the waiting mouths of the piranhas. The second landed on the deck. He raised his spear to skewer Wolfe. Wolfe raised

his feet and kicked the native squarely in the chest sending him into the river, to his death.

Suddenly, two natives dropped down from the trees to land onto the deck. One advanced towards Wolfe while the other turned to attack the pilot. The pilot steered towards some branches on the shore that hit the native's chest. His eyes bulged with surprise as the branches carried him to the river's death. The other native twisted his evil tattooed face towards Wolfe. He leapt pinning Wolfe to the boat's deck. The native pressed the heel of his hand against Wolfe's face towards the water.

A school of piranha aggressively pursued the boat. Wolfe's face was inches away from a piranha's hungry mouth. Wolfe shifted his weight and used the forward motion of the native, sending him into the river. The native's lower body dragged behind the boat while his arms grabbed at Wolfe, trying to pull him in. The piranhas devoured his legs as the native's face grimaced. A blood trail followed the boat and the native used his last ounce of strength to drag Wolfe into the water. Wolfe head butted him causing the native to lose his grip. A blood pool emerged as his hand descended into the writhing pool.

"From now on, I'm a vegetarian." Wolfe watched the mass of blood floating in the river. He stood on the floor of the boat and sighed with relief. The pilot eased the throttle down to slow the boat's speed.

"Charlie, you did it again. Your timing is amazing, I almost became the main course back there." Charlie turned around pulling her cap off. Long dark hair cascaded behind her back as she shook her head.

"I'd hate to see anything happen to that butt of yours." She walked over to him and they embraced in a long deep kiss. Wolfe dropped his arms and Charlie grabbed some tools under the deck.

"Did you get the treasure?" she asked.

"You know it, when we get back to civilization, you and I are going to live like kings. He unrolled a small pouch to reveal a handful of brightly coloured precious stones.

"You're daddy's little girls," as he admired the stones.

Suddenly from beneath the water, the last native reached for him. A bloody, fleshy hand juts out of the water and grabbed Wolfe's leg.

"Charlie!" Wolfe gasped. Charlie waved an axe and chopped the hand at the wrist. The rest of the body sunk beneath the boat. Wolfe grabbed his leg.

“Thanks for the hand,” he laughed, and then tossed in into the water behind the boat. “Some guys just don’t know when to die.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” as she and Wolfe embraced. Charlie’s hands grasped the pouch with one hand and a bowie knife with the other. She turned back to the camera with a mischievous grin.

“Cut and Wrap! Madison you were terrific, some of the best work I’ve seen my dear,” exclaimed Sven.

The movie set exploded into a frenzy of activity. The boat was in a pool with fake palms trees and bushes with a large green screen behind it. The half eaten native emerges from the water and slapped Wolfe on the back.

“Next time, I’ll get you,” the actor joked.

“In your dreams, George,” teased Wolfe and gave a high five.

Sitting next to Sven in a director’s chair was Steele stretching his arm in discomfort. Wolfe walked up to him.

“What do you think Steele, will I be a nominee for the next Academy Awards?”

“You bet Wolfe, right after a chimpanzee is nominated for his part in one of your comedies,” Steele sarcastically replied. Wolfe hit Steele in the shoulder.

“How’s the broken limb holding up?” Steele winced.

“How many times do I have to tell you, the arm is sprained not broken. I’ve been fine for the last couple of few days. I’m just keeping it in a sling to keep yahoos like you from touching it. You know I wouldn’t be in this mess if it wasn’t for you trying to break my fall.”

“That’s gratitude for you, save a guy’s skin and all he does is complain. Any news yet on how the cable accident happened? Maybe someone on the set is out to get you?”

“You wish. Nash thinks the bungee cords may have been old and my weight may have been their breaking point.”

“Maybe you should go easy on the hamburgers,” Wolfe tapped Steele’s stomach, “and be lean and mean like I am.” Steele punched with his formerly hurt arm to stop Wolfe’s teasing. Madison watched the exchange and shouted across the set.

“You know, if the two of you spent half as much time prepping your lines as you did bickering; you might actually improve your acting,” she chided.

“And you’re such a fine actress yourself,” Steele whispered sarcastically to Wolfe. Madison couldn’t hear Steele’s comments but had a good sense it was about her.

“Do you have something to say Steele? I keep hearing how you’re such a rude, arrogant prick but all you do is look like you going to say something to me and then chicken out. Do I scare you Steele?” She strolled up to him and tapped his chest with her finger.

“Nobody scares me at least of all you. You don’t want to hear what I think of you.” Steele was ready to say more and then caught himself as Wolfe smirked. Steele tried to compose himself, but the urge was so strong to criticize that his face instead became flushed. Madison dismissed him with her hand.

“Don’t cry Steele, I’ve intimidated a lot bigger men than you. Whenever you ever you find your balls and have something to say to me. I’m right here.” She looked over at Wolfe. “Are you going to disappoint me as well? You want to go tie one on tonight at the club, I feel like drinking my face off. What do you say?”

“Drinking your face off might be an improvement,” Steele thought to himself.

Wolfe looked sheepish, remembering his no alcohol bet. Suddenly he got an idea and perked up.

“Madison, we’d love to go out with you tonight!” He put his arm around Steele who was surprised by Wolfe’s reaction. “See ya around nine?” Madison did a double take on the two actors.

“For two guys who seem to hate each other, you sure look pretty chummy all of a sudden.” Wolfe gave Steele a hug; Steele tried to escape his embrace. “Nine it is. Don’t stand me up or I’ll pick some other guys to take your place.”

“More likely pick up some lesbians,” Steele muttered under his breath. Madison walked offstage towards the change rooms. Steele pushed Wolfe’s arm off and winced after moving his hurt arm too fast.

“What the hell was that all about? Are you ready to break your bet with me so I can share this picture with Madison Jones? You’re not telling me that you’re attracted to her?”

“Hey, when we were embracing in the movie, I wasn’t acting.”

“Wolfe, you’re pathetic, you can have all kinds of women. Why waste your time with that loudmouth?”

Wolfe grinned, “Let’s just say I like the challenge of the hunt.”

Steele shrugged his shoulders and looks offstage where Madison has vanished. “Who the hell does she think she is anyway?”

“Some prima donna action star who thinks the world revolves around her.” Wolfe turned to Steele. “The two of you are a pair made in heaven. “

“Right, I wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot pool. Besides she’s obviously doesn’t like men.”

“Don’t believe all the rumours you hear. After all, people thought you were an arrogant prick and actually you’re well never mind. Besides I need you tonight, since I can’t drink, you can drink for me, so she doesn’t suspect anything.

“What, I’m not your babysitter, just tell her that the big drunk Wolfe Neilson can’t have a drink tonight or he’s off the picture.”

“Come on Steele, you’ve got a chance to watch me in action, one mistake, one drink, you’ll get rid of me for good.”

“It does seem like too good an opportunity to miss. What do I have to do?”

“You order the drinks tonight, but you tell her you’re drinking virgin.”

“She’ll get a laugh out of that,” added Steele.

“She doesn’t care about what you drink; I’ll order something that looks the same and when she isn’t looking, we’ll switch drinks and I’ll drink the non-alcoholic. Don’t let her know I’m not drinking, or she’ll take off.”

“Drink for the drunk, now that’s a novel idea.” Steele rubbed his chin. “I’ll do it, especially if it means I might get rid of you for good!”

“You’re so nasty that you won’t be able to go an entire evening without insulting someone.”

“We’ll see about that!” replied Steele.

“Gentleman!”

Both men turned to Mr. Pang in a bright kimono robe leaning on his cane.

“Will you stop that Pang; you’re going to give me a heart attack with your vanishing and reappearing. How do you do that?” Steele grasped his hand over his heart.

“It is easy with people who are too absorbed with their own concerns.”

“Ouch, aren’t you a bit rough on us Pang,” Wolfe replied.

“It’s only hurts if it’s true.”

“Oh god, this guy is a living, breathing fortune cookie. Are we supposed to meet with you this evening?” asked Steele.

“In a manner of speaking. Are you going anywhere tonight?”

“Yes, Wolfe and I were just making plans. Why, what’s up?”

Pang beckons them to follow him.

“Good, then come with me for the preparations.”

Both look puzzled at Mr. Pang.

“Preparations, what are you talking about?”

Wolfe looks puzzled as he suspected something, but Steele beat him to the point.

“Are we supposed to be doing something with you tonight?”

“Not with me, for me.”

“But we’ve made plans; do some partying and maybe get lucky.” Wolfe elbowed Mr. Pang whose face remained a mask of emotionless neutrality.

“My task if completed in a timely fashion shouldn’t interfere with your fun.”

“Oh god, I thought he only had us for the morning.”

“I ‘have’ you whenever I wish according to the contract. Now follow me.” He motioned the two of them toward the hallway behind the set.

Steele was concerned. “What does he have planned for us now?”

They walk towards one of the wardrobe rooms. Steele examined Mr. Pang’s bright outfit.

“You know Pang that robe you’re wearing is pretty colorful. You aren’t worried that others might think you a bit feminine?”

“I have no concerns about other’s opinions on my manhood. Being in touch with one’s female side is what makes us whole. Balancing this ability develops our inner self and makes us better people.” Pang

looked back at Steele. “Are you concerned about your manhood? Do you worry what others think about you?”

“Hell no, I’m a man’s man and nobody can say anything different to me.”

“Good, you will be well suited for tonight’s test.” Steele was confused and turned to Wolfe.

“What the hell does that mean?”

They emerged at a sunken living room with two leather couches. On each couch was a wardrobe of clothes and shoes. Female clothes and shoes. Both actors peered around the room for women.

“All right Pang! You got us a couple of dates. I told you that he liked us.” Wolfe perked up.

“Where are the lucky ladies, Pang? Are they going to dress in front of us? Oh yeah!” Steele slapped hands with Wolfe.

Mr. Pang remained impassive. “You may dress wherever you like.”

Both men were motionless, Steele’s jaw dropped.

“Ah, I’m already dressed Pang thanks,” Wolfe commented.

“Not for tonight, you have different clothes to wear. Until the two of you understand and learn the meaning of my tests, these trials will continue.”

“What the hell are you talking about Pang, I’ve put up with enough of your

Steele’s voice trailed off as he was about to insult Pang and lose his bet. He trembled as he brought his temper under control. Pang noticed the silence.

“You are making progress; you are learning the value of other people’s opinions.”

“Actually, it is a little more complicated than that,” Wolfe commented.

“Nonetheless, progress is being made. Now the two of you may dress and then I will explain tonight’s task.”

Steele was infuriated and stuttered, “But, but, but” over and over in an effort not to lose his temper.

“That’s enough Pang, we’ve agreed to do your tests, but this is silly and beyond humiliating. What can this prove to you?” Wolfe asked.

“I decide what it proves, and you will do as I ask or be contractually removed from the picture.” He unrolled the contract they signed with Toni. “I will not ask a second time.”

“Toni’s going to hear about this!” Steele pounded his fist onto the tabletop as he looked at the clothes laid out. He handled the colourful long dress and then stared at a bra with enhancements inserted into the fabric. He turned to Wolfe.

“He’s got us for now, let’s get this over with.” Steele undressed down to his boxer shorts. Wolfe scanned over his clothes.

“This had better not take too long Pang, we’re meeting Madison tonight at the Fight Club.”

“Then that is where you shall meet her.”

“Do you ever not talk in riddles, Pang?” Steele grumbled as he pulled the dress over his boxers.

“Don’t try to figure Pang out Steele, he is an enigma wrapped in a riddle by some guy who smokes weed.” Wolfe held up the enhanced bra, “how the hell are we supposed to make sense of this?”

“The answers are there if you choose to see them”, Pang calmly sat in a yoga position on the couch opposite them.

Wolfe struggled getting his bra on, “I’m used to trying to take these things off, but I don’t have any practice putting them on.”

“Do you need some help?” Steele reached for Wolfe's back to grab the bra straps.

“I think I’ll try to this on my own,” Wolfe looked down at Steele’s dress. “Nice panty line,” pointing at Steele’s boxers showing through the dress.

“Now if you think I’m putting on female panties,” Steele pointed at Pang.

“That is not necessary for the task at hand.”

“Well spit it out, what the hell is this magical task that it requires us to wear women’s clothes,” Steele said through clenched teeth. Both turned towards Mr. Pang while finishing their own women’s clothes and wigs. Pang walked around the two men inspecting the results and pointing at them with his cane.

“Tonight’s task is about treating people as we wish to be treated.”

“By making us dress up as women? Pang you’re a sick freak!” Wolfe shook his head. Steele finished dressing and looked at himself

into the mirror. He twisted his head as if squinting his eyes would make him appear more attractive.

“Man, you are one ugly woman!” Wolfe said.

“You are both ugly women,” Mr. Pang commented.

“Thanks Pang, you are a master of motivation,” chided Steele.

“Your appearance will make tonight’s task that much more of a challenge.”

“But,” Wolfe started.

“Ladies, come in, you are needed.” Pang commanded and clapped his hands twice. Two petite Asian women entered from the side door with makeup kits.

“Wow, we are going to get some dates after all,” Wolfe started.

“Please sit down, both of you,” Pang motioned the men to the chairs in front of the mirror. The women giggled but do not speak. Pang implored the two women to begin their work.

“Please, do what you can with them.” They spread out their tools and various products.

After several minutes, Steele coughed from too much dust applied to his face and stood up in frustration.

“That’s enough.” He stares at the makeup woman. “Pang, I’m not letting this go any further until you tell us what’s going on?”

“I agree” chimed in Wolfe. Pang paced around them, showing not a hint of concern.

“Very well, your patience has been duly noted. Tonight’s objective is about thinking outside your needs and helping out someone you do not know.” Both men look at each other.

“What kind of crap is that? Who are we helping and how will you know that we succeeded?”

“You will both relay your stories to me tomorrow and if I feel that you have actually helped another human being, you will pass.”

“And if we fail?”

“Your workouts will double, for both of you, even if only one of you fails.”

“Sweet Jesus, Pang anything else?”

“Shut up Steele or he will give us something else to do!”

“Oh, you’re right, sorry.”

James Kochanoff

“The only other stipulation is that the task must be completed at this club you are about to frequent tonight.”

“The Fight Club! That club is full of testosterone guys looking to bash someone’s face in. If they see two guys in drag, they’ll rip us apart.”

“Then you better make sure that these ladies,” Mr. Pang motions to the two women, “help to make you look

” Pang stared at the two men “somewhat feminine.”

Chapter 8

Face Off

Fight Club – North Hollywood

8 pm

The Fight Club is the ultimate brawler bar. Spotlights on the roof of the club spark up the smog filled sky. A trio of Harley Davidson's drove into the parking lot, a biker and his date disembark off his bike. Above the front entrance was a huge lit billboard with a list of the evening's fights. Inside the doors, past the bouncers, was a large boxing ring surrounded with strategically located chairs and couches. There is a second level of booths and tables overlooking the carnage of the Fight Club. Every Saturday night the biggest, baddest, and brawniest men and women of any fighting style and size, come off the street and participate in one on one, no holds barred, brutal street fights. The winners each week receive prizes, bragging rights and a choice pick of women who cheered the winners. No weapons are allowed, only bare fists during a four-minute time limit. The fight was fast as each brawler goes all out during the time period. A match was about to begin.

A large biker entered the ring and readies himself for the fight. He rattled the ropes to express his excitement. His supporters cheered him with loud hoots and hollers as his grease filled hands removed his leather jacket. He took off his sunglasses to show two cold dark eyes void of compassion. He wiped the corner of his mouth to reveal broken teeth, a dentist's wet dream of repair. The biker smiled as his opponent steps into the ring.

A skinny teenager in a white karate robe stood alone in the corner. He had no entourage except another pimply young counterpart in baggy jeans and sweatshirt. The young fighter paced back and forth nervously in his corner as if unsure of his choice to fight tonight. His friend was trying to persuade him to leave and pointed to the door several times. The kid stared at the door and then at his opponent and then back at his friend. A look of fear was frozen on his face. The biker laughed; his friends yelled obscenities and threw objects at the boy making him duck and stumble around the ring. The biker's friends mocked the boy. He looked scared and stepped between the ropes as if to leave. Then the lights went low and two spotlights illuminated the center of the ring.

The teenager nervously stepped back into the ring to face the biker. His friend looked hopelessly on, shaking his head. An announcer's voice crackled through the sound system.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to introduce to you the first match of the night in our squared circle of “Fight Club!” The crowd erupted in spontaneous applause.

“The rules are simple – any foreign objects mean automatic disqualification. First man to fall down, removed from the ring or who submits to his opponent, is the loser. “The crowd lets out simultaneous boos. “In case of a tie, the audience will decide the winner.”

The crowd roars, especially the biker group. The announcer paused to work up the crowd’s anticipation before sayings, “Let’s get ready to FIGHT!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The crowd screamed itself hoarse as a beautiful ring attendant walks around the ring with a sign with the words FIGHT emblazed in letters. The young boy was frozen in his corner as if unsure of his first move. The biker swaggered slowly to him.

“Come on kid, I promise to make this quick.” The boy turned the opposite way as if to leave the ring. The biker reached out to grab the boy.

The boy’s head veered back towards the biker as he smiled. He spun his body towards the biker 360 degrees into a spinning back kick, which caught the biker squarely in the jaw. The biker eyes grew large and rolled into the back of his head. Blood flew out of his mouth and his body went limp. The biker crumpled into the mat face first. He was instantly unconscious. The young boy strutted around the ring, performed a few complicated martial art kicks for the crowd’s applause. Then flips the bird at the bikers, causing them to scream with anger.

“They fall for that at least once a month; you think those out of town bikers would stop believing the weak kid routine,” Steele commented. He and Wolfe were at a corner of the bar trying to appear inconspicuous. Steele was wearing a blue outfit with a curly black wig on his head. Wolfe was dressed as a blonde wearing a black two-piece ensemble with matching pearl necklace and earrings. Mr. Pang’s makeup girls had done wonders, no longer can you make out the whisker stubble on either one of their faces. Although far from pretty,

one could almost mistake them for two very big ugly women. After a few drinks. Almost.

“Hey, I tried the same trick in my movie, ‘The Warrior’ when I was first starting out. It was a lot fun back then,” Wolfe stirred a very feminine drink with an umbrella.

“I remember that movie, you actually weren’t too bad,” Steele remarked.

“Steele, watch it, that was almost a compliment! I wouldn’t want you to fall into any bad habits.”

“Hey, I figured I owed you one for the way you ripped into the bouncer for calling me ugly.”

“We girls got to stick together, Steele.”

“I just want to get this stupid task done and get out of here.”

“What’s say we just make up a story and each confirm it with Pang tomorrow?”

“Don’t forget, he said that he’d have ‘spies’ here watching us to make sure we followed through.”

“You think he was serious about that?” The two of them scanned the room in unison.

“You know what, I wouldn’t put anything by that little guy.” Steele looked at Wolfe.

“I think Pang’s makeup girls should have spent a little more time on you. You definitely still have a butchy look.”

“You should talk, a guy’s going to have to be pretty desperate to come near you.” Wolfe brushed some fuzzies off his clothes. “Besides, my clothes look better on me than yours. Black is definitely slimming for me.”

“Great, Wolfe Neilson giving fashion advice on women’s clothes.”

“I can do anything better than you. Unlike you, I can even look good as a woman. “

“Maybe you should quit action and get into comedy.”

“I’d do a better job than you in that kid’s flick, what was it called again, The Action Star and the Kid? Real catchy title.”

“Low blow, hey is that Madison over there?” Steele pointed across the bar.

“Where?” Wolfe ducked down

“Gotcha!” Steele laughed.

“We have to get this done quickly before Madison gets here so I can get changed.”

“Will you cool your heels about Madison; she’s not interested.”

“Steele, did you ever notice that you talk about her just as much as I do?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I think you like her as much as I do!”

“Get real, she’s rude, arrogant and always putting others down. Including us.”

“Sounds like your mirror image.”

“Well I’m not interested. She’s all yours, like you have a chance.”

“It’s okay for a man to dream.” Wolfe swished his non-alcoholic drink around. He got more enjoyment playing with his cocktail than drinking it. Steele stood up from his table and adjusted his dress.

“Man, these margaritas are making me want to use the washroom, how do women drink these things?” He pushed his empty drink away.

“You should try to drink these non-alcoholic ones; they make you want to puke.”

“I’ll be right back, I gotta use the sandbox.” Steele walked away.

“Don’t forget to use the right washroom,” yelled Wolfe but his words were lost in the noise of the crowd. Steele stepped to the back of club. The women’s washroom was on the right. Without considering his attire he turned left into the male washroom and stepped up to a urinal. There are separators between each urinal; as Steele eased in to relieve himself, an older, smaller man looked up at Steele and saw a big ugly woman. His eyes raised in confusion. Steele looked over and nodded, while the man continued to stare. Steele looked ahead on the wall and realized the man’s confusion. He made up a story to cover for his mistake.

“I’m a hermaphrodite, half woman,” cupped his hands under his fake breasts, “half man,” pointed his head down to his waist. The other man nodded his head and slowly stumbled away, pulled up his pants and ran out the door. Steele shook his head.

“I can’t stand people who don’t wash their hands.”

Steele emerged from the male washroom after washing his hands and walked down the corridor. He ran right into a sobbing teenage girl with red punk hair. She tried to get around him and into the women’s

washroom. They sidestep right and then left each blocking the other. The girl pounds on upper chest of Steele in frustration.

“Get out of my way, you stupid bitch!” as she shoved by him. Steele doesn’t like anyone pushing him.

“Hands off kid,” he yelled through the closed door. He checked his clothes.

“I can’t believe she bought that I was a woman,” Steele remarked as he pursued her into the woman’s washroom.

“Welcome to the Fight Club Mr. Vansome,” the bouncer welcomed Blaze and his bodyguards as he escorted them past the crowd. Once inside, Blaze surveyed the club and turned back at Crash and Burn.

“I want the two of you to spread out and find those ‘stars’. We know they have to be here; I called their limo service and it said it dropped them off here a half an hour ago. You need to make sure an accident happens tonight that puts them out of their movie for good.”

“But Blaze, I though you called in a favour to have that taken care of?” asked Burn. Blaze slapped him aside the head.

“Are you stupid? Have all those wrestling matches made your head soft? They screwed up so you two get a second chance. Let’s see if you can do it right this time.”

“Don’t worry Blaze, I’ll make sure their injuries put them out of commission for a long time,” threatened Burn.

“Their injuries have to be major; a broken arm or leg would be perfect. It’s got to delay their picture, with one of them down, it will close production and the film will go bankrupt.”

“Blaze, who cares, your films always take in more money than the both of them combined?” questioned Crash. Vansome smiled at his own success.

“I hate Wolfe for my own reasons but there’s some buzz about the two of them combining talents. I’d hate to it resurrect their careers. I am the one and only true action hero now. Find them and we’ll make sure they have an accident!”

Wolfe sat at his booth stirring his virgin drink with an umbrella stir stick.

“I wonder if I had one drink would Steele notice?” he mused. *One drink, what harm can it do? It’s not like I can’t stop, can I? It’s been really tough quitting cold turkey. As bad as Steele is to work with, he’s been a good motivation to take a break from drinking. I can’t lose this movie, it’s my last chance. But will one drink be a problem?* Wolfe signaled the bartender.

“Rum and Coke, buddy,” he looked back at the bathroom, “and make it quick!”

Next to him was a young kid, barely over the drinking age, slouched over the counter looking depressed or drunk. Wolfe was next to him at the bar stool waiting for his drink. The kid looked over, gave Wolfe a puzzled look and then his eyes sparkled as he figured who he was sitting next to.

“Hey dude, you’re Wolfe Neilson, I’ve seen all your movies! You’re like my favourite action star.” The boy then scanned Wolfe with the makeup and female clothes. “But dude, why are you wearing a dress?” he whispered.

Wolfe whispered back, “I’d appreciate you keeping this quiet. It’s a long story, nice to meet you?”

“Oh, my name is George, dude. Wow I can’t believe I’m sitting here with you. I’ve always tried to be like you, play hard and drink hard.” He raised his glass to take another swig of his drink; he’s looked pretty much in the bag.

“Hey George, you know that is just the movies, I’m not as wild as the characters I play.”

George hit him in the arm. “Get out of here, everyone reads about your drinking binges dude. You’ve been checked into more clinics than you’ve had movies. You live your character man, you gotta respect that. You’re the ultimate drinking man!” George paused and gazed at Wolfe, “when you not wearing a dress that is.”

Steele closed the door to the women’s bathroom.

“This is a new experience,” he commented.

“Hey kid!” he heard weeping from a stall “What’s your problem anyway?” Steele pounded on a stall door. “Come on, talk to me, maybe I can help.” A tough biker chick came out of the stall. She shook her head at him.

“I think you’re got your own problems to deal with girlfriend.” She turned as Steele watched her leave.

“Hey, I thought you were someone else.” He noticed that she went straight out the door. “Doesn’t anyone wash their hands around here?” Steele saw the punk girl at the sink washing her hands and face.

She regraded him with disgust. “What the hell do you want?”

Steele heard the attitude in her voice and reconsidered. “Never mind,” he dismissed her with his hand. “You came in here crying, I thought you were in trouble. I’m pretty good at fixing problems.” Steele punched his fist in his palm in a very unfeminine manner. The girl doesn’t notice.

“Leave me alone, unless you are some kind of expert on boyfriends with selfish personalities, you couldn’t possibly help me.” Steele stopped from exiting the door and turned back into the washroom. He stared at himself in the mirror and then looked back at the punk girl.

“You’d be surprised by what I know.”

The girl can’t keep up her tough-girl front and began to cry. Her face was soon covered with streaming tears, causing her make-up to run.

“He can be so sweet some of the time, but anytime we get close he becomes a prick and treats me like trash.” Steele thought of his own relationships.

“Guys can be real jerks.”

“Have you had a boyfriend like that?”

“Girl, I’ve been that boyfriend.”

“Huh?” She tilted her head sideways, looking closer at Steele as if she was ready to discover his secret.

Steele recovered. “I mean I’ve acted like your boyfriend, being abusive, rude, putting others down because of my own flaws. I’ve even put down my friends.”

“Why hurt people like that?”

“You know most of the time I don’t even think I knew I was doing it.”

“You’ve got to meet my boyfriend!”

“What?” Steele exclaimed as the punk girl dragged him out of the washroom.

Back to the bar, George was looking sick.

“I don’t feel so good,” George lowered his head to the bar.

“I know that feeling,” remarked Wolfe. He pushed his untouched rum and coke drink down the counter and continued drinking his non-alcoholic one.

“Hey kid, sleep at home and make room for the paying consumers,” barked the bartender.

“Maybe this paying customer wants him to stay. “Wolfe slipped a twenty on the bar, which the bartender greedily grabbed.

“Whatever, just make sure he doesn’t get sick or I’ll have a bouncer kick him out.” The bartender poured a drink for another customer. George raised his head off of the bar.

“Listen dude, why are you dressed up as a woman? You’re not queer, are you? That would totally ruin my image of you.”

“No worries there George, let’s just say I’m on a bet and leave it at that.”

“No problemo man.”

“How old are you George?”

“Twenty-three next month”

“How long have you been drinking?”

“Since I’m thirteen.”

“You sound like me growing up. Are your parents around?” Wolfe asked.

“Just my mom, dad screwed off when I was a kid, couldn’t handle the strain you know?”

“I know, except my dad couldn’t handle the strain and stuck around. It wasn’t a pretty sight. He made me want to be strong enough so I could beat the crap out him.”

“Did you?”

“Only once, but it didn’t feel good because it was too easy. For so many years he beat me down and then suddenly, he was an old man. I think that’s when I started drinking because I didn’t have him as a demon to fight anymore.”

“You’re not going to tell me the dangers of drinking man, cause that would be so lame,” drawled George.

“I’m not going to tell you to do anything, George. Your life is yours to waste. You got to learn by making your own mistakes. Me, I’ve learned that I can’t remember whole days at a time.”

“Dude! Right on.”

“It’s nothing to brag about, if I could go back and change things, I would. I can only change now.”

“You’re telling me there’s no alcohol in that drink?”

Wolfe pushed it over to George. George smelled it.

“Dude, this is fruit juice. Whoa, you are going straight. How are you feeling?”

“I’d rather be drinking. I can almost taste the booze, but it’s not worth it. Not for one drink, not for everything I’ve lost.

“Wow, you are totally not what I expected”

“I’m not what I expected either George,” as they clinked glasses.

Blaze pushed a couple aside to get through the crowd. He looked above to see Crash combing the club. Blaze Vansome pointed towards the back of the club, motioned for Crash to continue searching. As Vansome walked forward, Steele and the little punk girl moved past him.

“What’s your name?” Steele asked over the roar of the crowd.

“Luanne, but my friends call me Lou,” she said.

“Well Lou, what is it that you are trying to do by introducing me to your boyfriend?”

“I just want you to meet him, tell him what you told me.”

“Like he’s going to listen me. Have I ever listened?” Steele murmured under his breath.

“Look, there he is!” She pointed to a tall gangly grunge kid with spiky hair and more body piercing than one human should ever be allowed to have. It must have been hell for him to go thru a metal detector.

“Scud, over here!” Lou beckoned. Scud looked over without interest and then stared when seeing that Lou is with Steele.

“Who’s your ugly friend?” Lou hits Scud in the shoulder.

“Scud, stop being so rude, I just met her, she’s my friend. We’ve been talking about stuff.” She turned to Steele. “What’s your name?”

“Ah Steel - ---- Stella, my friends call me Stel.” Scud cared less about Lou’s new friend.

“Well StelLA, what bullshit have you been talking to my girlfriend about?” Scud mouthed off. Scud’s attitude grated on Steele and made him wonder if this was how others feel about him.

“No bullshit, I was telling her that underneath all your piercing crap and rude behaviour was probably someone who cared about her.”

Scud turned to Lou. He gave her a look that resembled something close to affection; she smiled back.

“Yea, I love her lots,” he replied, gave a nasty grin and sneered, “NOT”. He slapped her in the face, leaving a red mark on her right cheek. “Don’t ever talk to strangers about our business, you hear.” Lou cowered as Scud raised his hand to strike again. Steele’s hand grabbed Scud’s before he got a second chance.

“Looks like I was wrong again, some assholes are just assholes.” Steele pushed Scud down until he was on his knees cursing at Lou.

“So, you’re going to have your 'lesbo' girlfriend fight for you, that’s okay. She wouldn’t always be around, then I’ll give you a beating that you won’t forget!”

Lou looked dejected. Steele turned to Scud filled with anger.

“You won’t be hitting anyone if I break both your arms.” He raised his other fist.

“No!” Lou yelled. Steele felt puzzlement. “Stel you can’t hurt him!” She looked very concerned for Scud’s safety.

“But he’ll hurt you,” Steele replied.

“Don’t listen to her Lou, I was just talking you know. I could never hurt you.” Scud made a face at Steele reinforcing his lies. Steele loosened his grip on Scud and faced the fact that he might not be able to change the cycle of violence. He was no expert on abuse, but sometimes the victim believed that the beater sincerely wanted to stop.

“Oh, don’t loosen your grip Stel,” said Lou. Now Scud was puzzled and looked back to Steele in confusion. Steele’s face smiled and as Scud turned his head, Lou had a huge grin on her face.

“Smack!” Lou belted Scud in the stomach causing him to bend over in pain.

“I love you too baby, but I’m hoping this hurts you more than it hurts me.” She gave a super kick to Scud’s groin.

“Owwwwweeee,” he screamed in a high-pitched shrill voice.

“Don ‘t you ever come near me again you sleaze bucket. I’m done with you!” He writhed on the floor unable to put any words together. Lou wasn’t scared of him anymore; his spell on her was broken.

“Thanks Stel, I couldn’t have found the courage to this without you.”

“I don’t know Lou; I think you always had it in you.”

Lou raised her hand for a high five. “Girl power” she cheered. Steele looked at himself, shrugged and then slapped her hand.

“Girl power!” he echoed.

Wolfe and George were still deep in their conversation

“What makes you drink so much George? I’ve told you about my demons, what drives you?”

“Dude, you may be my idol and all, but some things are hard to talk about.”

“I hear you, for years I’ve been ignoring my problems; drinking just numbed me to what was happening in my life.” George listened and looked as if he wants to say something.

“Did you ever feel like you wanted to be something, but you were afraid of what others would say or do to you?”

“Yea, that’s what makes us human. Besides, if people can’t accept you for what you are, then they’re not your friends.’ He crossed his legs in a very feminine manner, realized his pose and then moved his legs into a more masculine pose.

“That’s easy for you to say man, you have everything. Money, fans, power. Who’s going to tell you what to do?”

Wolfe thought of Mr. Pang tasks, Toni’s contract, and Madison’s demand to meet him tonight.

“It’s not always what it looks like,” as he gazed into the wall mirror to see his ugly reflection peering back at him.

“Get outta here dude, you always have the cool lines in your movies, especially before you’re about to ‘off’ a bad guy. Do people ever ask you to repeat stuff from your movies?”

“Sometimes,” Wolfe nodded. “People always want you say the same line over and over when you meet them.”

“Are you going to tell me that a movie star like you has it rough?” George accidentally knocked over his drink and it shattered behind the bar. The bartender came over to George.

“It’s time you leave, you obviously have had too much to drink.” He gave George a shove backwards.

“I’m sorry,” George squeaked. Wolfe got into the bartender’s face.

“Relax, the kid just had an accident. Why don’t you give us two non-alcoholic drinks?” The bartender shrugged.

“Fine,” the bartender stared at George while saying, “you two ladies can have whatever you want.” He went around the corner to get juice in the back of the bar. George watched him leave.

“Are you okay? I get the feeling that you get pushed around a lot, am I right?” Wolfe asked.

“It’s that obvious isn’t it? I’m no Wolfe Neilson.” George nodded.

“Who is? I’m certainly not the hero I play in the movies.” Wolfe stared back at the bartender. “Don’t let that bully and his ‘ladies’ comment get to you.”

“Speaking of ladies dude, are you going to tell me why you are dressed up like this?” George pointed at Wolfe’s makeup. “You don’t look like a professional at it.” George spied Wolfe’s hairy leg poking out of his dress.

“Well, to keep my job I had to make some...” Wolfe pointed at his fake breasts, “adaptations. But I’m not complaining, I could have refused to do this and left the movie. It’s all about making choices. My trainer told me,” Wolfe does an impersonation of Mr. Pang’s voice and mannerisms. “Tough decisions can lead to tough consequences. How you deal with them is what builds character.”

“Wearing a dress is making you a better person?” laughed George. “Doesn’t it matter what people think about you?” Wolfe looked around the bar.

“Well I’m kind of hoping no one will recognize me,” Wolfe played with his wig and laughed. “But seriously, people are going to criticize you no matter what you do. Friends, family, newspapers will always have an opinion. Hell, if I always did what people told me to do, I’d never try anything. Sometimes you just gotta go for it.”

George nodded his head and then stood up, energized by Wolfe’s little pep talk. He held out his hand.

“Thanks Wolfe, you truly are a hero,” George studied Wolfe’s female clothes, “that a guy can look up to. You’ve given me some direction.” George turned to the bar.

“Bartender!” George motioned to him to come over.

“What do you ladies want now?” he replied.

George leapt towards the bartender across the counter. He grabbed the bartender by the shoulder. Wolfe sat in shock.

“What the hell did I say to make George attack the bartender,” Wolfe murmured.

The bartender was startled and before he regained his composure, George moves forcefully with his attack. Before the bartender can shake him off and Wolfe can grab him, George kissed the bartender right on the lips. The bartender was surprised and then embarrassed. George was beaming, whatever the result, he’d been able to act like who he truly is.

“Listen I have no idea if I’m your type, but I like you. Would you see me afterwards?” George asked.

The bartender was caught completely off guard and drew his fist back to plaster the kid. Fortunately, he’s smart enough to know an incident like this could hurt his image and tips. He dropped his arm back to his side and composed himself.

“Kid, I don’t swing that way,” as he headed to the back of the bar pantry. George walked out from behind the bar and goes back to sitting on his stool. The club patrons watched George as he sat down. The bartender grabbed a drink and past it over to George.

“Here, have a drink on the house. Let’s forget the whole incident ever happened.” Everyone around the bar nodded their approval and went back to their conversations. Wolfe regarded George.

“That’s what you’re been trying to tell me the whole time. The fact you were gay. I didn’t see that one coming.”

“Well you said go for it. And I did!”

“Well next time, don’t take it so literal, he could have knocked your block off.”

“I don’t care, just to be myself takes a huge load off my shoulders.” He played with the coaster and realized there was a name and number scribbled on it. George looked up at the bartender who caught his eye.

“Thanks dude, if an action star like you can be comfortable wearing women’s clothes in public, then I guess I can finally be myself for once.”

“Well, you still got a way to go dude, but congratulations on your first step.”

“Thanks Wolfe, here is to being true to yourself.” He raised his glass to toast. “Clink! Steele’s not going to believe this one, Wolfe thought.

Blaze’s face was beet red with anger. He couldn’t figure out how two well-known action stars can’t be found in one little Hollywood club. Burn approached from the other side of the club.

“Burn, where are they? The limo dropped them here.”

“Maybe chauffeur brought them here, and they skipped out?”

“I doubt it, this is definitely where they would hang?”

Vansome saw two big women walking towards the club exit. He was puzzled by their ugliness and their familiarity. Then he made the connection.

“Crash, cover the exit, don’t let those two women leave!”

“Sure Blaze, but is now the time to be chasing women? Big ones really aren’t your thing.” Crash wondered.

“Shut up, it’s Wolfe and Steele! They’re dressed up as women. I’m sure of it! That’s why we haven’t been able to find them!”

Wolfe and Steele were attempting a speedy exit to leave the club to change their clothes for their rendezvous with Madison.

“Do you think Pang will be proud of us tonight?”

“He better be, considering what he put us through.”

“You know what Wolfe, I hate to say this, but I almost, let me stress almost, enjoyed tonight. Dispute this ridiculous getup, I’m glad we came.”

“Whoa, that’s the last thing I thought the great action hero ‘Steele Taylor’ would say to me as he’s wearing a woman’s girdle.” Steele gave Wolfe a friendly push.

“Well I guess we all can change.”

“Speaking of changing, I can’t wait until I change out of this getup so I can meet Madison later on.”

“Will you get off of this Madison kick, she’s an ice queen, and you are out of your league.” Wolfe faked being offended while he adjusts his breasts. They were about to exit the main door when they made eye contact with Crash. He sized them up and shook his head in disgust. They glanced at each other and made a hasty 180 degrees turn only to see Burn about ten feet behind them.

“Any chance that the two of them don’t recognize us in these monkey suits?”

They look at each other. “Naw!”

They stood back-to-back; fists ready as the two bodyguards approached from different sides. The four squared off for battle – men against she men. The club crowd watched the encounter when a large female bodybuilder blocked the fight.

“Can’t you guys read the sign?” She pointed to the sign above the door. “No fighting except in the ring.”

A middle-aged announcer with salt and pepper hair climbed into the ring. The spotlight shone on him as the murmuring of the crowd became silent.

“Ladies,” he turned to the two action heroes in their dresses, “and gentlemen! Welcome to the title match of the evening. This will be a tag team competition with no time limit.” The crowd roared their approval.

“In this corner,” the announcer pointed to the bodyguards, “weighing at a combination of 595 pounds, all the way from parts unknown, the Bruise Brothers!” The crowd booed as Crash and Burn posed with a display of their massive biceps. After styling and profiling their massive body frames, the booing faded.

“In the opposing the corner, at a combined weight of 475 pounds, from Hollywood, give it up for the Sisterhood!” The spotlight shone on Wolfe and Steele. The crowd was hushed, so quiet you can hear a belch in the back of the club. The fans couldn’t decide whether they want to boo or cheer these ugly women.

Suddenly from the middle of the club, Lou yelled out, “Kick ass ladies!”

George screamed out from the bar, "They crushed the competition last week!"

People shrugged their shoulders and cheered their support. The club was now electric with betting and money exchange. Wolfe readied himself for the fight. Steele leaned over to whisper some advice.

"Watch these guys Wolfe, they're dirty and I get the feeling they want to hurt us bad."

"I'll watch out. You keep an eye on the crowd, wherever these meatheads are, Blaze can't be too far behind."

"Right on, one more piece of advice."

"What's that?"

"Don't do any high kicks or the crowd may see your underwear!"

The announcer waited for the crowd to quiet down before he yelled out the final instructions.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the rules are simple, there are three ways to win. Knockout, throw out or submission. No foreign objects, but you can hit with any part of your body. May the best man ... "The announcer stared at Wolfe and Steele and rephrased his words, "person win!" The announcer paused and focused on the crowd, which was silent with anticipation.

"Let's get readytoRUMBLE!!!!!!!!!"

The crowd erupted in applause as Burn slapped his brother's hand and lurched towards Wolfe. Wolfe ducked and evaded a straight-arm clothesline. But Burn crashed into corner knocking Steele off the ring apron and to the ground. Steele recovered and shook himself off the floor.

"You want to play that way, do you?" Steele jumped up onto the ring corner and yelled to the referee to watch the interference.

The referee turned towards Steele as Burn slammed Wolfe into his brother's corner. The two of them double-teamed him with vicious body blows. Steele pointed towards the cheating.

"Stop them," he yelled at the referee. The referee turned back just as Crash let go and gave the referee an innocent look

"Who me?" Crash replied as Burn grabbed Wolfe and threw him against the ropes.

Wolfe's momentum rebounded and Burn grabbed him on the return, slamming him into the mat. This was a wrestling match at its worst. Crash and Burn were in their element and they knew every dirty trick possible. Through the crowd, Blaze stepped forward, barking orders towards the brothers.

"Come on you idiots, hurt him! Put him out of action for good. End his career." Blaze yelled as he approached the ring. Burn slapped hands with Crash and switched with his brother in the ring. Wolfe groggily tried to get up. He staggered towards Steele and reached towards his open hand. He missed as Crash grabbed him in a massive bear hug.

"Help me!" Wolfe shouted.

Steele entered the ring to help and was stopped by the referee who directed him back to his corner. Steele angrily retreated but not before Burn took a dirty shot on Wolfe while the referee's back was turned. The crowd boomed.

"Come on you bum, watch the match," Steele hollered at the referee.

Crash was slowing squeezing the air out of Wolfe's lungs and his head was beginning to drop to his chest. The referee inspected Wolfe and pulled his arm up and then dropped it to see if Wolfe is unconscious.

"One," he yells. He grabs Wolfe's arm again, pulls it up and lets it drop to his side again. There is still no response from Wolfe.

"Two," he howled. The referee put Wolfe's arm up a third time and dropped it. Halfway down it stopped and Wolfe's eyes opened as his arm reached to the sky in protest. Wolfe found his second wind.

He pushed Crash off of him and shoved him into the ring post. Crash hit his head on the post, which only made him angry. He lunged for Wolfe who punched Crash in the gut. Crash bent over and fell to the mat. Wolfe crawled towards Steele. Crash staggered towards Burn. The crowd screamed in excitement.

Wolfe slapped the hand of Steele who charged into the ring and kicked the back of Crash's head who fell short of his corner. Burn tried to come into the ring anyway and was stopped by the referee. Then Steele surprised the crowd. He pushed Crash at Burn, taking Crash's hand and tagging Burn himself. The fans go wild.

"What a ham!" exclaimed Wolfe from the opposite corner.

Burn charged into the ring directly at Steele. He ducked as Burn flew into the ropes behind them and bounced back at Steele who knocked him onto the mat. Burn was groggy from impact and Steele climbed the corner ring post. On the top rope, he looked to the right and the crowd roared. He looked to the left and the crowd screamed. He leapt down on the slowly rising Burn hitting him with a solid forearm to the head and Burn fell down again.

“Finish him off,” roared Wolfe.

Steele placed Burn in an arm bar submission hold.

“Never thought I’d get to use this movie move for real,” yelled Steele to no one in particular. The referee was in position.

“Submit or I’m going to break your arm,” Steele yelled. Burn was ready to submit to the referee when.....

“Bam!” Steele fell flat on his back from a solid kick to the head.

Blaze Vansome entered the ring!

Blaze pulled Steele up and Burn held him so that Vansome could deliver a spinning roundhouse kick. Steele fell face first to the mat. The referee tried to stop the interference, but Crash pulled him out of the ring. Blaze basked in the attention of the crowd, raising his arms despite the fact the crowd was booing. Blaze turned to finish his work and received a flying leap from Wolfe who knocked him on his ass.

The crowd screamed its approval. Wolfe chopped vicious slaps to Blaze’s chest, knocking him down on one knee. Wolfe leapt at the rope and used the momentum to charge at Blaze. Inches before contact, Crash who has already entered the ring, scooped Wolfe out of mid air. All combatants are in the ring with a decided 3-2 advantage. Burn and Crash hold Wolfe and Steele with their arms behind their backs while Blaze softened them up with a flurry of punches and kicks. Blaze was ready to give his finishing blow.

“What a shame if one of you broke your arm and couldn’t finish your movie? What a shame that would be!” Steele and Wolfe stared at each other. Neither one could struggle out of their captor’s massive arms. Blaze readied the killing blow. His kick was aimed straight at Wolfe’s right arm. He sized it up and aimed at the wrist to inflict permanent damage. A slender leg in a white jumpsuit deflected his kick.

Madison Jones joined the fight!

“What the hell is going on Blaze?” She kicked him in the head causing him to stagger back.

“These guys may be losers,” she pointed at Steele’s and Wolfe female clothes, “but they’re my losers. Can you understand that, you stuck up,” she punched Blaze in the head, “pompous,” she punched him in the stomach, “prick!” she punched him in the groin.

Blaze doubled over with pain. Steele and Wolfe pushed backwards in unison on Burn and Crash forcing them to the back of the ropes. They used the momentum to twist their bodies to knock them down on the mat. The action knocked the breath right out of them. They wrapped the ropes in a figure eight around their arms, tying Burn and Crash to the ring rope. Their own weight kept the ropes tight around their arms, making them immobile. Steele and Wolfe ran to the opposite side of the ring and hit the ropes to fly back at the brothers. They used their forearm momentum to send both Burn and Crash sailing over the ropes and onto the ground below.

Blaze was distracted by the brothers’ exit. He turned and saw a female finger pointing in his face.

“You’re watching the wrong show my dear, this female,” she pointed at her body, “is the real deal!” She kicked forward that pushed Blaze back over the ropes to the floor.

“Your winners, the Sisterhood!” yelled the announcer and grabbed the arms of Steele, Wolfe and Madison who raised their arms in the air. The crowd roared their approval as loud music fills the club to maintain the adrenalin of the fight.

As the crowd returned to drinks and socializing, Wolfe and Steele shook hands.

“We did it! We actually beat those muscle-bound freaks.”

“You weren’t half bad.”

“You were almost as good as I was, which is saying a lot!”

Suddenly both of them received a slap on the face.

“That should knock the taste out of both of your mouths,” sneered Madison.

“Owww,” they wailed.

“What the hell was that for?” questioned Wolfe as he rubbed his jaw.

“What was that for? I just saved your butts and the two of you are shaking hands like you’re the heroes. You guys owe me an explanation. Don’t play stupid with me just because you’re wearing those getups,” she pointed at their women’s clothes.

“We can explain,” started Steele.

“Oh, you’re going to explain all right. Why the hell would you dress up like women and then pick a fight with the biggest, ugliest guys in the bar.” She looked at them, “Well maybe the second ugliest guys.” She thought for a second and gave them both a long hard look. “The two of you aren’t gay, are you?” Steele almost choked. Wolfe thought quickly.

“I’ll tell you whether I’m gay if you’ll tell me if you’re a lesbian?” Madison made a face like she was ready to club Wolfe.

“Will you give me an answer Wolfe? Why are you are dressed like this?” Behind them Luanne and George came out of the crowd and stood behind the heroes. Wolfe noticed their presence.

“Let’s grab a pizza with our new friends and we’ll explain everything.”

“Lead the way action girls!” Madison added with sarcasm. The five of them leave the club for food.

“I still think she’s a lesbian!” Steele whispered to Wolfe.

“Sounds like you’re in love,” teased Wolfe.

The next morning – on the movie set

9am

Steele and Wolfe bowed to Mr. Pang as they left the fitness center.

“I think he may have actually been pleased with our results last night,” said Steele. The two of them walked out of the gym into the waiting tram. The driver navigated around the movie set building for the morning’s first shoot.

“You’re right, his workout wasn’t quite as difficult as usual either. I think we’re finally making progress with him. Now if I could just find a way to make progress with Madison, I’d be all set,” answered Wolfe.

“Good luck, I don’t think she believed a word we told her about Pang’s challenges. She probably thinks we’re weirdoes who get our jollies dressing up in women’s clothes.”

“But I got her to smile. That’s step number one in Wolfe’s book of picking up women.”

“You should get out of the action business Wolfe and publish a book on lame-ass pick-up lines. You probably would find a whole audience of pathetic guys who would eat that stuff up.”

“You know what Steele?”

“What?”

“Every once and in awhile you come up with a really good idea. I may do that.” Steele slapped his forehead.

“I can’t believe you; when I’m sarcastic you take it as a compliment.” They jumped out of the tram and rounded the corner of the set. There was a crowd of people milling about talking with elevated, excited voices. Everyone was gathered around Toni, who was standing on a platform above the group.

“What’s going on?” questioned Wolfe.

“Beats me,” said Steele.

They walked towards the group. Toni noticed them approaching and motioned to everyone to quiet down.

“All right, everyone’s here, listen up! I’ve got something important to discuss,” she yelled.

“What’s wrong Toni, somebody getting canned?” yelled one of the stage crew. Everyone laughed but some of the laughter was mixed with nervous trepidation.

“I wanted to thank everyone for the work on the picture. The Hollywood buzz on our project has been overwhelming. All the dailies that Sven has shown have gotten terrific response.”

Sven was sitting in the corner away from the group in his director’s chair. He seemed gloomy and uncharacteristically quiet. He weakly raised his hand at the mention of his name.

“I sense a ‘but’,” Wolfe commented.

She nodded and continued.

“The ‘but’ is this, all productions need money to continue and as of last night,” she looked at Wolfe and Steele who returned with puzzled stares, “one of our main backers has terminated his commitment. I have been unable to get the studio to confirm more money until this matter can be resolved. As of this minute, the picture will cease productions.

I'm afraid I'll have to ask everyone to leave the set effective immediately.

"What!" The group erupted into anger and dismay. A host of voices filled the studio.

"I was really counting on this picture!"

"What will I tell my wife?"

"Why did this happen?"

"If the movie is so hot how come no one will pay for it?"

Toni stepped down from the platform and worked her way through the crowd to Wolfe and Steele. They were both struggling with Toni's speech.

"Toni, what happened? How could the money just disappear like that?" Steele raised his arms in anger and frustration.

"You know as well as anyone Steele, movie making is a fickle business. Sometimes backers get cold feet and cut their loses. He called first thing this morning to inform me that all his money has been moved out our account. Any further money concerns should be dealt with through his lawyer."

"So, this is it, just when I was starting to put up with Steele, the whole picture deal is done? You and I have done a lot of movies together. You always pulled something out of your hat."

"Toni, we both need this. Is there anything that we can do?" Steele pleaded. "I mean anything?"

"The two of you have one chance to turn this around, one chance only. Unless you action stars can convince our main backer to change his mind, this movie is finished!"

Chapter 9

Enter the Dragon

Dark shadows danced on the wooden wall, illuminated by large masses of dripping candles. An intruder silently crossed the floor; moonlight reflecting him into the mirrors lined along the wall. Majestic statues ornated the corners of the room while huge canvas curtains flowed from the ceiling drape onto the floor. A cool wind blew the curtains lightly in the breeze creating a light tapping on the floor; making the only sound in the temple. Stealthily, he crossed the room to the wall of mirrors. Blaze peered at his covered face in the reflection and then looked away, suddenly alerted by some far away sound. He searched for the source of the noise.

Crash!

A hand forced itself through the glass mirror and grabbed a stranglehold on Blaze's throat. He gasped and twisted the arm of his assailant, pulling the rest of the body through the mirror. Shards of glass sailed throughout the room and both men went flying to the floor.

The attacker jumped up quickly into a karate stance as both the martial artists squared off. The attacker threw a punch to Blaze's head that he easily evaded. A punch to the midsection was swiftly blocked. The attacker spun a roundhouse kick and missed, smashing the mirror behind him, breaking more glass. He turned and saw Blaze silently waiting his approach. The attacker grabbed several broken glass shards in one hand and launched into a series of kicks and fists that are blocked at each turn. He feinted a punch and cut Blaze on his chest, drawing blood.

The attacker smiled. Blaze touched the wound on his chest. He brought his hand to his mouth and licked the blood. Now Blaze smiled and the attacker frowned. Blaze flipped across the floor and landed a solid blow to the midsection of his attacker. Blaze shrieked his fighting scream as he released all the air from his body to impact his punch. The attacker grunted, eyes widen and then slumped to the floor unconscious.

Whhhossh!

A sharp metal fighting star hit the wall just below the Blaze's ear. He turned around just in time and does the splits to avoid another star to the head. The next star comes straight at his heart, but Blaze snapped it to a complete stop in the air inches from his chest. The new attacker pulled a samurai sword from its sheath and slashed it through the air at a speed almost beyond humanly possible. His mastery of the sword was flawless as he executed a series of complicated moves punctuated by a swipe at a row of candles that he cut in two. The candles do not move until he clapped his hands as they tumbled to the floor. He beamed a wicked grin, illuminating a silver capped tooth. He yelled a battle cry and leapt towards Blaze to deliver his deathblow.

A second later he fell to the floor as Blaze delivered a fatal shot with the throwing star into the attacker's forehead.

Blaze walked over the fallen body and stepped into a doorway. He saw a shadow of another assailant and removed a knife from under his tunic. He threw it but missed his target and it landed deep into the wooden wall. The running shadow moved steadily into the darkness, and Blaze chased it down a set of steps. The air was damp and sweet smelling as he ran into a wine cellar. Blaze stopped at the base of the stairs and explored the room with his limited visibility. There were rows of shelves with large barrels with spouts and bottles of wines placed high. Suddenly a noise from the back of the basement caused Blaze to turn around. A new attacker showed his face, concealed by an evil looking mask. Suddenly, from different rows of wines shelves, four masked figures slowly walked out towards Blaze, backing him against the wall.

Trapped!

Blaze remained calm, silently assessing his expressionless opponents.

The five figures approached, a large one with a mace on a chain attacked first. The mace bit into the rock wall inches from Blaze's shoulder. He grabbed the end of the mace and leapt at his attacker. He wrapped the chain around the figure's neck, breaking it instantly. His body slipped to the floor. The second attacker swung his weapon in the air narrowly missing the Blaze's chest. Blaze avoided the blade and broke the attacker's arm at the elbow. He smashed the attacker's nose,

pushing the bone into his brain, causing instant death. The second attacker dropped lifeless to the floor. Blaze took the dagger from his lifeless hand and avoided a kick by the third attacker. He used the knife to puncture the belly of this attacker and twisted it making the wound fatal. The third attacker collapsed in a bloodied heap. Blaze felt pieces of glass as a wine bottle was smashed over his head. The fourth attacker tensed, hoping for success. However, Blaze shook his head, grabbed the broken bottle by the neck and plunges it into the throat of his attacker. The fourth attacker fell writhing to the floor. Blaze peered at the bottle.

“Must be a bad year”

He turned to the fifth attacker who has not moved during the entire fight. He was massive, easily reaching seven feet tall. This final attacker was the most skilled and had assessed Blaze’s fighting skills. The two stared motionless waiting for the other to make the first move. They braced for attack, suddenly Blaze heard a funny sound; was it sobbing?

“Remove your mask,” he commanded to the giant.

A large hand slowly removed his mask to reveal a grotesque face with one eye larger than the other. There were tears coming from his big eye. Blaze averted his face to avoid the ugliness.

“Now I know why you wear a mask!” The man cringed from the comment.

“Please spare me, I will not attack you.” The giant bent slightly in a submissive pose.

“Lead me to your sensei and you will not die by my hand tonight,” proposed Blaze.

The misshapen figure nodded and gave a grotesque smile. The giant relaxed as if his death has been prevented. He made a fatal mistake of glancing upwards. Blaze noticed the look and went into the splits narrowly avoiding a saw blade to his back. The blade continues through the air to land in the soft flesh of the giant’s heart. The giant stared in shock at the blade imbedded into his chest. He looked at the Blaze and then fell face forward. Blaze examined the fallen heap of the giant.

“Sorry pal, I guess you didn’t cut it!” The image on the television screen froze as Blaze’s face utters his line.

“Stop!” Blaze yelled. He jumped up from his leather chair, sitting in front of the editing suite. He had been watching the footage from his new martial arts movie “Eye of the Dragon!” There were two other people sitting with Blaze. In front of him was the editor and the young director was sitting to the side holding his head in his hands in a tired pose.

“I look terrible in these shots. The lighting is all wrong and my hair looks bad. We have to reshoot this scene!”

“We can’t Blaze,” the director replied, “We’re already way over budget and the cost would be phenomenal to raise the set and bring all the fighters in again.” Blaze stepped over to the director and stared deep into his eyes.

“You don’t tell me what you can’t do. I don’t care how you do it. Just make it happen. Remember my contract, I have final script approval. If you don’t do it, you’re off this picture.” He stormed out of the suite; Crash and Burn followed behind him outside the trailer. Crash put on his sunglasses.

“Blaze, we just got great news. We got a call from the Men of Extreme Action set; their movie has been shut down, just like you said it would!” Blaze’s frown turned into a wide grin.

“Finally, some good news for once. I knew I couldn’t leave such a simple task to the two of you. Our ‘partner’ knows how to take care these matters.”

“Blaze, isn’t it a bad idea to owe the partner?” asked Burn.

“Don’t remind me, but they’ve known for awhile that I wanted this movie to fail. I don’t know what they did this morning to get the job done and I don’t care. I’m the biggest action star in town and their careers are over. It’s worth any price to put those action stars out on the street.”

“I’m not sure if this trip is worth it,” moaned Steele as he leaned back into his seat. He sat in the passenger seat of Wolfe’s convertible as they were driving west on Sunset Boulevard towards the mansions of Beverly Hills.

“Worth it? If talking to this backer gets the movie back to filming, wouldn’t that be worth it to you?” Wolfe stated.

“Of course, I want us to be back on the movie set. But what are we going to say to change his mind?” Steele looked down at his feet. “Hell, why would he listen to anything we have to say? Maybe we are two-has been actors!”

Wolfe pulled off to the shoulder of a residential street and his car screeched to a stop. He turned to face Steele.

“I am not a has-been action star. Take it back!”

“Of course, you are, don’t deny it you hack!”

“Take it back!” demanded Wolfe.

He grabbed Steele by the throat and pressed his fingers to strangle him.

“All right, I’ll take it back,” Steele answered. Wolfe loosened his grip. “You are an alcoholic has been action star!” taunted Steele and he grabbed Wolfe by his neck to break the grip.

“At least I’m not a has-been action star that nobody likes,” replied Wolfe.

The two of them locked their arms on each other’s throats. They struggled back and forth hitting both sides of the car interior. Around a corner, a Star Tours bus drove down the street with a group of tourists clicking madly away with their camera at famous star’s homes. The tour guide was proudly describing the area.

“To the right is the mansion of famous baseball great, Roster Clements.” She gazed at the convertible on the opposite side of the road with Wolfe and Steele fighting. She was excited after recognizing the action stars.

“Remember to tell your friends that you saw it here on Star Tours. If you turn quickly to the left, you will see Steele Taylor and Wolfe Neilson obviously rehearsing a new scene from their new movie Men of Extreme Action.”

A chorus of ‘Ooos’ and ‘Ahhs’ rang from the tourists as dozens of cameras flashed at the car.

“Phil, slow the bus down!” The tour guide exclaimed to the driver.

The bus halted, but Steele and Wolfe don’t even notice. As the tourists clicked their cameras, they stopped their fist punching long enough to sense their audience. Both Steele and Wolfe looked at each

other and the tourists in the double-decker bus stopped snapping shots. Suddenly an old man yelled out.

“Take him out Wolfe, you’re the stronger action star!”

“No way!” a grandmother from Ohio screamed. “My money’s on Steele, he can kick Wolfe’s butt any day of the week.” The bus erupted in a series of angry yells, pushing and shoving. Steele pulled the top on the convertible to hide from the tourists’ view. Wolfe turned the ignition and they sped past the bus. Wolfe looked over to Steele.

“See, we matter; people still look up to us!”

“That’s great Wolfe, if starting a fight with a bunch of tourists is meaningful, I can’t wait to see what we inspire the backer to do.”

They rode in silence as they approached a large metal gate. Wolfe spoke into an intercom.

“Good afternoon, Neilson and Taylor to see Mr Tassel.”

“One moment please,” a female security guard replied from the speaker.

“Wait a second, Taylor as in Steele Taylor and Neilson as in Wolfe Neilson?” Wolfe smiled at Steele as if to say, ‘Who’s a has been?’

“In the flesh,” Wolfe answered to the intercom.

“You’re my son’s favourite movie stars, can I have an autograph?”

“We’d love to,” Steele leaned over to the speaker.

“By the way, which one of us is your son’s favourite?” Steele asked.

They both tilted closer to the speaker to hear her response. She paused, then she spoke.

“Well, to be honest my son really likes Blaze Vansome, he’s the in thing these days. But I just thought it would be a kick to get the signature from two former actions stars.”

“Former!’ yelled Steele, about to climb through the intercom and strangle the woman.

Wolfe put his finger to his mouth and pushed Steele back into his seat.

“We’d be happy to sign anything when we’re inside.”

”Come right in, Mr Tassel is expecting you.”

They drove their car through the main gates. They followed a cobblestone driveway and parked along a circular turn. The mansion’s grounds were exotic with colourful foliage and water fountains. Lush

vines hung from the trees and parrots perched on branches high above them.

“How did this guy make his millions?” inquired Steele as he climbed out of the convertible.

“I think Toni described him as self-made multimillionaire from before the dotcom crash. His company was worth 200 million on paper before he sold it all. Apparently, the buyer lost his shirt when the product under-performed in the post crash market.

“Sounds like my kind of millionaire, making money from the corporations’ mistakes,” replied Steele.

“Actually, it was more luck than business savvy.”

Both Steele and Wolfe turned to the source of the voice. Richard Tassel grinned from ear to ear as he extended his hand out to introduce himself to the two action heroes. Although Tassel was short in stature, next to Wolfe and Steele he appeared even more unimposing. On top of his lack of height, he had a mass of bright red curls and thick bifocals that added to his awkward appearance. Due to his overall first impression many people have made the mistake of underestimating Richard Tassel’s business ability. Only his voice belied someone who was mature in years and of keen mind.

“I really wanted to keep the company for another year, but this property came up and I feel in love with it. Immediately I decided to sell my shares. That decision made the difference in me getting an asking price of \$200 per share vs. what is now.”

“Which is?” asks Steele.

“Are you familiar with penny stocks?”

Steele laughed, “Well whatever the reason, congratulations on making the right choice.”

“Unfortunately, one choice can lead other difficult choices.”

“Which leads into why we are here,” said Wolfe.

“Of course.”

“Why suddenly pull out your backing of our movie?” asked Wolfe.

“Our producer told us you were a big fan. What’s changed?” questioned Steele.

“It’s nothing to do with the two of you but everything to do with my family. The reasons are much easier to show than to explain.”

The three of them walked towards the back of the house. As they reached the heart of the garden, Steele and Wolfe were overwhelmed by the number of exotic animals roaming the property, colorful birds in the trees, gazelle grazing and an old lion sunning on the rocks. Steele and Wolfe tiptoed around the beast to avoid disturbing it.

“This guy runs a freaking animal reserve,” Steele whispered to Wolfe. Richard motioned them to a huge pool area populated by sea life. He pointed into the water.

“After selling my business, these animals became my reason to live. Most of them are fighting extinction. Although I can’t return them to a life in the wild, I can ensure their safety in my sanctuary. They come to me injured, deformed, unable to survive in the wild so I take care of them.”

“Did you wish you could have done this when you were a kid,” asked Wolfe.

“Good guess,” replied Richard.

“So, are you telling us that fish are more important than our movie?” Steele interrupted.

“Steele,” scolded Wolfe.

“No, let him speak. As much as I have always idolized the two of you, I heard that Steele was a bit of jerk in real life.” Steele’s shoulders slumped and reviewed his next words carefully.

“I’m sorry. This movie meant a lot to me, to both of us and I don’t understand what these animals have to do with your cutting your financial backing.”

“Apology accepted. Maybe the rumours are wrong about you.” Richard continued with his explanation. “You have been my heroes for years, both of you. I love the extreme action in your movies and the wild stunts. They make you forget about your worries for two hours in the theatre. So naturally, I jumped at the chance to finance a movie starring both of you when my manager presented it to me. What’s 20 million to be part of action movie history?”

“20 million?” Steele’s eyebrow rose.

Wolfe hit him on the back. “I think he really likes us!”

“But once production began, I started getting threatening phone calls, letters, lawyer correspondence, telling me to drop my commitment.”

“What did you do?”

“What any wealthy man does, I issued an army of lawyers on them. It seemed to work for a while, their reasons to stop me from financing got so ridiculous that my lawyers said not to worry about it. Still I couldn’t figure out why someone would spend considerable resources and time to kill the financing for a Hollywood movie. The strangest thing was despite all the paperwork they sent my lawyers, and me we could never track down who was behind it. It was all shell companies and lawyers paid to follow their wishes. The actual people behind it were invisible.”

“It would have to be somebody fairly powerful and well connected to stay hidden like that,” replied Wolfe.

“That leaves you out,” Steele jeered.

“It leaves a number of people out. There are more people with money and power in Beverly Hills than anywhere in the country, but these guys were professionals. They left no trail to counter sue until we researched one of the lawyers they were using.”

“Don’t tell me, I bet he had mob ties.”

“How would you know?”

“In my movie ‘Leader of the Pack’, I played a young trial lawyer who had to fight the mob as I brought their Don to trial. It’s a good movie, Time magazine gave it an eight!” swaggered Wolfe.

“Well you’re right, this lawyer had definite mob connections, but I couldn’t find out who exactly and what they had against me. Then last night came the last straw.”

“Did they put a hit on you?” Steele asked. Wolfe rolled his eyes.

“Nothing quite so dramatic. But much more effective.” He pushed a manila envelop across to them. Steele opened it. He shuffled through a number of pictures of a young red-haired boy in a schoolyard with a striking resemblance to Richard.

“Your son?” Steele stated.

“Thomas is going to a private school in Stanford for autistic children. He’s everything to me since my wife was killed in a car accident two years ago.” Wolfe pulled a photo out with Thomas with an “X” crossing the young boy out. A plain typed letter accompanied the photo reading, “A movie or your boy? What’s more important to you?” Wolfe took a deep breath.

“These people were going to hurt your son?”

“Not if I can help it! I’ve taken him out of the school and put him in a safe place for the time being. I’ve got the best-trained men looking out for his security. Still I can’t take any chances. When I got this letter this morning, I panicked. I called Toni and told her to cancel my commitment. I have nothing against you, but this hit too close to home.”

“We understand. It’s just hard to believe that someone would want to sabotage our movie so badly that they would threaten your family to do it.”

“Have either one of made any enemies lately,” asked Richard.

“Just lame brain Vansome at the club,” replied Steele.

Both Wolfe and Steele looked at each other.

“You don’t think...,” Wolfe started.

“Well I know you don’t think unless there’s a drink in your hands.”

“But Vansome’s just a movie star like us. He doesn’t have the influence or money. Well, he probably does make more money than us, but certainly not the connections to do this?”

“Only one way to find out,” nodded Steele. Wolfe turned to their host.

“Richard, thanks so much for your time. We’re sorry our movie has caused you all of these problems. We’re going to find the people that did this.”

“Thank you. As exciting as the gun and knife battles are in your movies, my family comes first. You find the people that did these and put them away, I’ll refinance your movie.”

“We’ll try our best,” Steele shook Richard’s hand.

Both Steele and Wolfe waved goodbye as they left the jungle paradise. They jumped into the convertible.

“What’s next?”

“We need to find out more about Vansome and his connection to those pictures,” answered Steele. “There’s only one way to find out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I think we should pay an unexpected visit to his place.”

“Break into his house? How are we going to do that?”

“Remember the movie where you were detective for Scotland Yard, you were the master of locks; no door could keep you out. You should be able to get us in.”

“I was a pretty clever detective; no lock could stop me. But it helped that production manager provided all the equipment for the movie. I don’t have any real gadgets for breaking into a house.”

“Exactly, so we need to find someone who can actually provide us with the real tools.”

“And you know such a person?”

“We recently met such a person,” as Steele produced a business card.

The LA Suburbs

5pm

The late afternoon sun warmed the roof of the small home in the San Fernando Valley. The house was a typical suburban home, dead grass from last years drought on the front lawn, children’s toys scattered around the front entrance. The only thing unusual about the home was the garage that was slightly bigger than most with a large number of vents, wires and antenna sticking from the roof. In the window stood an Indian idol that watched all those that entered. Steele rang the doorbell. He heard the sound of footsteps walking towards the garage door’s entrance. The door opened as Wolfe and Steele stood at the entranceway.

“Hey Hamesh, bet you didn’t expect to see us so soon?” Steele held out his card from the jail.

“I was just finishing praying to my many gods and look who appears. Please come in!” beckoned Hamesh. He was excited by his visitors’ arrival and rushed around the garage trying to clean it up.

“Sindhu, we have guests!” Hamesh yelled over the stairs leading into the house. The clanging of pots and pans rattled from the kitchen as a female’s voice shouted.

“Hamesh, you didn’t tell me you were having company. Now I must cook more food!” A petite Indian woman rounded the corner. She was wearing a very colourful traditional Indian sari and has long black braided hair. She was surprised by the appearance of the action stars and dropped a tray of Indian fried cookies on the floor.

“Hamesh, you brought movie stars home! Why didn’t you tell me?” She stared down on the floor. “Look what I’ve done!” Sindhu picked up cookies that have fallen off the tray.

“That’s okay, eight second rule,” as Steele grabbed a cookie from the floor.

“Don’t just take one. Take another. Eat, eat, eat!” she commanded the men to take the others from her tray.

“Sindhu, these are my friends. They have offered me a most magnificent part in their next film! Isn’t that right?” he looked at Steele.

“That’s why we’re here,” Steele replied. Sindhu was excited.

“It’s about time you had some actors of Indian descent in your movies. You do know we come from the second largest country in the world? You’re not going to make my husband into a villain, are you?” She waved a cookie at them in a menacing manner.

“No Sindhu, your husband is a good guy in our books,” replied Steele.

“He is, although he does get into some trouble now and again,” she pulled his earlobe.

“Ouch!” Hamesh yelled in discomfort.

“Make sure you don’t get into any trouble with your movie friends. Oh, I can’t wait to tell the women at our temple who came to visit us.” She took the tray of cookies and went back to the kitchen. “Hamesh, no explosions while our guests are here. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, my most loyal wife.”

“And I will cook more food in case our guests stay for dinner,” Sindhu disappeared into the house. She was too quick for Steele or Wolfe to answer her. Hamesh stared at Steele.

“This is most exciting. Did you really mean it when you told her I could be in your movie?”

“Absolutely, but there’s been a delay in production. That’s why we need your help to get the movie back on track. Once we start filming again, we’ll bring you in. Deal?” Steele stated.

“Deal!” Hamesh had a big smile on his face like a kid on Christmas morning. “How can I help you kind gentlemen?”

Steele continued talking. “At the holding cell, you told me that you were the man who can get anything. Is that true?”

“As you know, we Indians are an extremely resourceful people. If there is something that you need, then I, your humble servant can certainly get it for you.”

“Good, then let’s say we have a ‘job’,” Wolfe put his two fingers in the air on the word job, “where we need certain tools and plans to visit someone’s house. Could you get these tools for us?” The verbal tiptoeing around exasperated Steele.

“We want to break in to Blaze Vansome’s house to discover how he shut down our movie. Can you help us get in?” Hamesh folded his hands together.

“You want a poor Indian man to break the law to bring down a major action movie star?” He gushed in his Indian dialect. “Oh, praise be my many gods,” as he turned to an idol on a wall. “Count me in!” Hamesh held out his hand. Steele shook it to signify a deal.

“I have an Indian friend who works in a security firm that might find the schematics for his home. We Indians are everywhere you know. At one billion and counting you can find us in many important places,” he said proudly of his heritage.

“I’m starting to get a sense of that. Hamesh this could be the start of a beautiful relationship!” exclaimed Wolfe.

“Whoa,” interrupted Steele. “Before we start congratulating ourselves on a job we haven’t even started, shouldn’t we get some equipment to help us break in? I don’t know about you Wolfe, but in all the movies I’ve done, I’ve always crashed in through a wall or a window, I’m not good at breaking in a house quietly.” Hamesh puffed out his chest.

“Do not worry my rather large friend, I will teach you both the secrets in breaking through security systems.” Hamesh paused as wondering if the two movie stars could be bugged and added a disclaimer.

“..... from some stories my fellow Indians have told me.”

“Of course,” Wolfe nodded catching on to Hamesh’s coyness.

“Ready to learn some new tools?”

“Hamesh, you may need to spend a bit more time with Steele than me. I’ve played a successful secret agent for years and I’m well versed in many of the tools of the trade.” He picked up a metal box with a switch on the front panel. “I’ve used this in many of my movies, it’s a

complicated electronic lock pick that guesses the frequency of audio alarms. I remember using this in jewellery heist movie to shut down the alarms in a museum. I know my gadgets!”

Steele grabbed it and pressed the button while pointing it in the opposite direction. The garage door opened and raised up and folded under the ceiling. Steele pressed it a second time to close the door.

“Both of us are ready to learn, at this point we have nothing to lose,” Steele replied.

“We could go to jail!” added Wolfe.

“All right we have everything to lose but that’s okay because we’re going to do this. Why? Because of pride. This is our last chance at redemption. To prove to all the critics out there that we can still make a good movie. To all the producers out there that we can still make them money. And to the fans that we can still entertain.”

“Bravo Steele, you should become a politician, maybe even governor. Do you believe it?” Wolfe questioned.

“Of course. Mind you, it doesn’t hurt that I am almost broke, and I still haven’t been paid a cent for this movie. If we don’t get it started again, I’m going to lose everything I own.”

“Amen.” Hamesh walked over to the workbench and rubbed his hands in anticipation of assisting the movie actors. Hamesh shown an ordinary wall full of tools from pliers to hammers. He pressed a button on the corner of a beam and the wall rotated to replace the lawn tools with hi-tech gadgets.

“I will teach you the ten easy steps of how to break into a man’s home, but you must only use my equipment?” asked Hamesh.

“Let’s get started,” replied Wolfe.

“Then let’s get this party rolling,” Hamesh reached for his phone.

A phone call later

Hamesh spread out his tools on the workbench.

“My fellow Indian with the security firm has told me that Vansome’s home comes with a set of guard dogs trained to attack anything with a heartbeat.”

Wolfe offered some advice. "In my movie 'The Last Avenger', I took out a gang of guard dogs with my bare hands." Wolfe held out his hands as if they were weapons of destruction.

"Yeah, I bet you were so scared that you peed your pants. You were worried that one of their choppers would sink into your groin and bite 'Tiny Tim'," teased Steele.

"No dog is getting close to this," Wolfe pointed to his crotch, "I'll shoot them before they come ten feet of me, right between the eyes," Wolfe touched the bridge of his nose.

"Would you wake up Wolfe, this isn't one of your movies. You can't go around shooting people's dogs to break into a house!" Steele yelled.

"Actually," Hamesh picked up a mean looking pistol, "that's exactly what you must do."

"What?" They both were puzzled.

"See," Hamesh shot the gun and a dart landed dead center on the bull's-eye on the wall. "These darts have enough tranquilizer to knock out a large Doberman for two hours. Plenty of time to get in and get out."

Steele held the gun and aimed through the scope. "No problem, I am an expert marksman." He aimed at bullseye and hit it dead center.

"What can I say?" Steele held out his arms looking for applause. Hamesh took the gun back.

"Ah but my friendly action star, this no movie. Now, if we were in an Indian action movie, we would break out into song and dance. The dog won't just sit there and wait for you to shoot him. Trust me it's a lot tougher on a moving target."

"So how do you take the dog down?"

"You'll have to draw it out, be the bait; make it run past you. You must have the whole side of the dog's body to aim at instead of just its head. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, how many darts?" replied Steele.

"You get five darts. Don't waste them!" Hamesh grabbed something from the filing cabinet. "In case the worst does happen, you use all of your darts and the dog is still on your tail, try this." He put a small tube in Steele's pocket.

"What's that?" Steele examined the container.

“Plan B, if all else fails, pull the pin and throw it near the dog.”

“What is it Hamesh, a grenade? Are we going to blow the dog up?”

“You’re watched too many of your movies Wolfe, obviously it’s a piece of meat to distract the dog” answered Steele.

“Both of you have not watched enough Indian movies. We have no money for grenades, we just blow smoke in your face instead. These dogs are well trained, they’re not going to stop for a piece of meat; you are the only piece of meat they want. Don’t worry, I’ve never had to use Plan B. Now for your next item.” Hamesh dragged hardware out of his cabinet.

“Typical glasscutters take too long to cut through glass and are too noisy. Ever heard the scratching sound of a sharp blade cutting thru glass? Hurts your ears more than Sindhu’s voice when you haven’t finishing your supper.”

“Yes, but in my movie, ‘Bullet to the Brain,’ I cut through a whole wall of glass doors with e a sub-machine gun and it shattered in seconds,” commented Steele.

“And all the villains were told in the script to ignore the noise,” teased Wolfe.

“Using my mini flame thrower, you can cut through in no time, no fuss, no noise.” Hamesh ignites the flame and cuts a sample piece of glass like butter.

“Be careful where on the glass you cut, most alarms are activated by the pressure of the windowsill coming up. Enter through the door after you shut the alarm off and only use the glass cutter as a last resort.”

“All right, are you going to show us what computerized gadget are used for taking the alarm system out. Must be pretty high tech?”

“I continue to surprise my North American friends,” Hamesh handed Wolfe a cellular phone. Wolfe was puzzled.

“Oh, I get it, the phone is disguised. It is really a high-tech lock decoder”. He opened the phone and tried to reveal a secret compartment. He is surprised when it seems like nothing more than a cell phone.

“What gives?”

“How many phone calls does a security company gets each day that are false alarms? Somebody’s neighbour trips it, their pet sets it off, or

their two-year-old child, bless his little heart, opens the wrong door and activates the alarm. At the appropriate time, you will call, make an excuse and tell security not to come.”

“Only works if the security system believes you are the owner and if you have the security code,” Wolfe said.

“I’ll work on finding the code, you two are actors, decide who can do the voice of Blaze Vansome.”

“I vote for you Wolfe; you’ve always had a knack for doing pathetic muscle-bound losers!”

“Ouch, I think you just did an impersonation of an insensitive prick. You’ve got Vansome to a science.”

“I am beginning to sense that you fellows may not be the cohesive unit I once believed?” Hamesh asked.

“Don’t let Steele’s attitude put you off, he loves working with me.”

“Wolfe have you been drinking again?”

“Okay, you two can figure it out later who gets to make the call,” Hamesh handed each man a pair of sunglasses.

“It’s okay, I prefer my Oakley’s.”

“These glasses aren’t for style, they’re for night vision.”

“I knew that.”

“These glasses will make the dark brighter, they’re better inside than outside.”

Steele put his on. “How do I know these work?”

“I can lock you in a small closet to test them out,” offered Wolfe.

“That’s okay, I’ll take Hamesh’s word for it.”

Hamesh threw a grenade over to Wolfe. Wolfe is shocked and almost dropped it.

“Don’t worry my American friend, it’s a smoke grenade not an explosive one. Use it in a confined space if you need a distraction.” He snatched a small pack of clay substance.

“This on the other hand you should treat as gentle as your own child. C4 explosive in case you have to blow a safe.”

“How much do we need to do that?” Steele was perplexed.

Hamesh pointed at one of the two rolls. “That should do it and use this trigger,” he handed them a remote with a red light, “to ignite. Don’t get too close when it goes off or you will be deafened from the sound.”

“I’ll let Wolfe handle the explosives,” said Steele. “What’s next?”

Hamesh reached into a desk and pulled out a small gadget.

“The final piece of equipment is the spy ear.” He held a miniature earpiece that fit nicely over his ear. “With your night vision goggles, you’ll be able to navigate around the house in the dark but in case there is a pet or someone out for a midnight snack, the spy ear will amplify the sound.”

“Looks like something out of cereal box,” commented Steele.

“Try it on,” Hamesh commanded. Steele fit it over his ear.

“I can’t hear anything,” he complained.

“Turn up the volume.”

Steele fiddled with the control. Wolfe sneaked up behind him.

“Hey Steele, can you hear me?” he screamed.

Steele knelt down as pain overloaded his ear. He turned around and punched Wolfe in the midsection, knocking him down.

“Stop yelling, these things are sensitive!

“Hey let me try.”

“No way, you defaulted when you tried the junior high joke on me.”

Wolfe looked over to Hamesh. “Hamesh, do you want to join us on this expedition?”

“Sorry guys, I may love your action movies, but I am just a humble merchant trying to sell his wares. Besides Sindhu would kill me. Have you ever angered an Indian woman?

“No but I have angered enough American women to know what you mean,” answered Wolfe.

“Hamesh, for a guy who’s so smart and well-connected how the hell did you end up in jail in the first place?” Steele asked.

“Good question, worthy of a swami to answer. This is what I’ve learned during my stay in America. Criminals rob people and pay the penalty with years of their life. I am but a simple merchant, selling these gadgets is where the money is made and it’s perfectly legal! I could tell you many adventures that I had selling to my fellow countrymen in South India.”

“Nothing sweeter than a crook gone legit,” laughed Steele.

They got up to leave the garage

“Call me in three hours and I should have the pass code and schematics of Blaze’s house.”

“You’re the best Hamesh!”

“I think I’ve already planned your part in our movie, as the gadget guy who supplies the heroes,” suggested Steele. Hamesh looked disappointed.

“What’s wrong, I thought you wanted to have a part in our movie?”

“I do, it just that can I get a scene where I shoot someone?”

Hamesh stared up at them with expectant eyes. Steele and Wolfe laughed.

“No problem, there’s nothing like shooting a man in cold blood to start your day. In the movies that is.”

“My humble thanks great American action stars. I really appreciate your visit.” He handed them a receipt. “This will cover costs for the tools and security map. I eagerly await your arrival tonight.”

Wolfe and Steele waved goodbye and jumped into the convertible. Wolfe backed the car out of the driveway. Steele stared at the receipt.

“Oh my god,” Steele exclaimed. Wolfe stopped the car.

“What wrong now?” asked Wolfe.

“I think we just got robbed the legit way.”

Chapter 10

Payback

Vansome's Mansion grounds

around midnight

Two men, dressed completely in black dropped down from a stone wall and landed softly in the garden. They knelt in the soil and watched as a light turned off around the pool. Wolfe and Steele had acted this scene out dozens of times in countless movies. Only this time it was for real and there was only one take.

"Are you sure we should go in now? Maybe Vansome hasn't gone to sleep yet," asked Wolfe.

"We've already talked about this. The security company change shift right now and it's the best time for a false alarm to be called in. Besides, Vansome's house is so big, we could probably have a party in one wing without waking him up."

"Is your house this big?" Wolfe gazed at Steele.

"I've had to downsize." Steele used a pair of binoculars to look into the mansion's grounds.

"Which way?"

Wolfe pointed to the right. They crept down to the end of the flowerbed.

"Where's the service entrance?"

"Over there," He pointed to the lighted door in the distance.

"Piece of cake, we'll be home before the Tonight show is over." Steele rushed out into the open towards the doorway.

"Steele, don't move!"

Steele turned around to see Wolfe's scared face looking at something in front of him. Steele moved slowly and could barely make out the outline of a huge Doberman. The dog's eyes and white fangs glowed in the darkness. The dog's mouth issued a menacing deep growl.

"Steele, stand perfectly still!"

"Shoot the frigging gun before it bites," stammered Steele. Wolfe pulled the dart gun out of his vest. Steele stood deathly still. The dog's eyes were locked onto Steele's face. Wolfe aimed with the scope and fired. His first shot went sailing over the dog's head straight into the ground.

“You idiot, you missed,” hissed Steele.

“I’m trying, but the dog is facing me head on, there’s not much to aim at. Could you move over a bit so that it follows you?” Steele stared back at Wolfe in disbelief.

“You want me to move to give you a better shot? What if it takes my movement as an aggressive move and goes for my throat?”

“Well, if you want me to waste another dart.”

“I’ve seen how effective that was, for an action hero you sure are a lousy shot.”

“Hey, knives are my thing. Guns are yours. Now are you going to move or not?”

“Okay, okay, but I’m going to do this slowly.”

Steele watched the dog; it hasn’t decided if Steele was a threat yet but was readying its attack. Steele shuffled to the right. The dog barked but turned a little bit to the right exposing more of its torso.

“That’s better, a little bit more to the right.”

“More! If I move anymore, this dog’s going to attack. Take the shot.”

“Just a little bit more and I’ll have it dead on.”

Steele moved a little more to the right causing the dog to arch its back, ready to pounce.

“Wolfe! Get him NOW!”

Wolfe had a perfect shot and fired the dart gun. The dog charged headlong at Steele. The dart landed noiselessly in the ground where the dog used to be.

“Wolfe!” Steele yelled. “Do something!”

Steele was running for life with the dog in hot pursuit. The Doberman doesn’t bark but was intent on its prey. Wolfe charged after them and tried to line up the back flank of the dog.

“I’ve got you this time you mangy mutt!” Wolfe whispered and pulled the trigger for the third time.

“Fshhhoootttt!” The dart flew through the air going straight at the dog’s rear end. Suddenly, the dog veered right to miss a tree and the dart sailed pass and hit Steele in the butt. He stumbled to the edge of the pool.

“Wolfe, I going to kill you!”

He fell face first into the water. The dog doesn't lose a step and leapt into the pool. Steele swam to the other edge with the Doberman paddling furiously to grab a hold of him.

"Wolfe will you hurry up and shoot that dog!"

Wolfe aimed his fourth dart. He pretended he was acting out a role of an adventurer in his "Fossil Hunter" movies. No pressure, there is still one dart left after this, if he missed then the Doberman will get Steele. He hesitated, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

"Wolfe!" Steele broke his concentration. Wolfe lined up the dog in his crosshairs and fired. "Smack!" The dart hit the Doberman in the chest while it was paddling in the pool. Steele pulled himself out of the deep end. The dog's jaws snapped on thin air, just missing Steele's foot. Steele squeezed the water out of his shirt.

"Jesus Wolfe, did you have to hit me?" He took the dart out of his butt and threw it into the bushes. "What if it knocks me out too? I feel tired already!"

"Stop the bad acting, I think Hamesh said the dose wasn't strong enough for a human."

"You think, great just wake me up when this whole mess is over." Steele lied face up on the side of the pool trying to recover his breath. The dog was whimpering and swimming circles in the pool. The Doberman was paddling slower and slower.

"Ah Steele, we have a problem," said Wolfe. Steele stood up from the edge of the pool.

"That's unusual."

"I think the dog is going to fall asleep and drown in the pool."

"Serves it right for trying to bite off my genitalia."

"But Steele, it doesn't know better, it's just trained to attack strangers. We can't let it drown."

"Then you jump in hero man. Be my guest."

"I can't"

"Sure, you can, you just won't because you don't want to get wet. Don't worry the water's warm."

"No, I mean I can't physically, I never learned to swim," Wolfe bowed his head.

“What? Wolf Neilson, action star. You were in that movie in the ocean, ‘The Battle of the Tanker.’ You had to swim through an obstacle course of debris and ships to save the girl.”

“All stunt doubles. I didn’t do a second of swimming except for them to splash some water on my chest. I’m a big fake. Now can we have this conversation later. You have to save the dog.” The dog couldn’t get itself over the edge of the pool and was about to pass out.

“Look it’s sinking”

“All right~!!!” Steele jumped into the pool again and swam towards the dog. He grabbed it under the shoulders, dragging it to the shallow end of the pool. He stared at the dog while swimming.

“Hope you remember this dog the next time you want to take a bit out of my backside.”

He heaved the almost comatose dog to the side and pushed its heavy body onto the edge.

“What do they feed you here, small children?” He turned to Wolfe whose eyes were frozen with panic.

“What’s wrong, I saved the damn dog?”

Steele rotated his head into the drooling teeth of an angry Rottweiler. Steele fell back into the pool. The Rottweiler focused on the sprawled pose of the sleeping dog. He licked the Doberman’s face as if to try to revive it.

“Oh hell, doggie’s got an uglier brother.”

“Of course, don’t you watch the movies, these dogs always come in pairs,” whispered Wolfe, not wanting to alert the second dog to his position on the other side of the pool.

“Shoot the dam dog!”

Wolfe aimed the gun as Steele changed his mind. “Wait! Give me the gun this time.” Wolfe threw him the gun. He caught it before it could sink to the bottom of the pool. Steele yawned, “maybe the dart is having an effect.” He aimed; his eyelids flickered. He pulled the trigger and fired just as the dog leapt into the pool. The dart flew into the bushes. Steele paddled vigorously.

“Wolfe, I need another dart!” as he swam towards the other side with the dog swimming after him.

“I can’t that was the last one!”

Steele jumped out of the pool with the dog in hot pursuit.

“Tree,” Wolfe yelled and pointed as they dashed up the tree away from the pool. They climbed and the dog leapt just missing Steele.

“Wow, he almost ate my foot. His mouth is bigger than my foot.”

The dog growled and hunched its front feet down with its back up in a defensive arch.

“Great, now what are we going to do, wait until he goes to asleep? Actually, I wouldn’t mind taking a few winks right now anyway,” Steele yawned again as he laid down on the branch. Wolfe punched him awake.

“Don’t go too asleep! Besides, this dog’s barking will probably alert someone in the house soon.”

“C’mon Wolfe, you got us in the mess, think of something!”

“Me, how am I to blame for being stuck up a tree?”

“Well if you haven’t wasted all off our darts!”

“I was trying to save you,” Wolfe hit Steele in the arm in frustration. Steele punched back. The two of them pushed each other knocking themselves down a limb. The dog jumped between them narrowly missing with his jaws as it fell back down to the ground.”

“This is getting us nowhere,” Wolfe complained, “wait, didn’t Hamesh give us a backup?” Steele checked his vest.

“Uh yeah he did. He didn’t say what it was, but at this point if it helps, I don’t care.” Steele pulled out a small pack the size of a plastic test tube. He removed the plastic seal and the contents of the tube smelt like fresh ground beef. The label on the front reads ‘Throw, will blow up on impact.’

“I don’t know what it is, but it smells like steak.” Steele sniffed and threw it through the tree branches, and it landed on the ground. There was the sound of air rushing into a small opening and the contents of the tube immediately inflated into a life size Doberman pinscher!

Steele shook his head, ‘If that’s the big Plan B, we’re screwed!’

“Wait,” Wolfe yelled. “Look.” The dog whiffed the meat smell and stared into the eyes of the still Doberman doll. The dog backed down from the tree and formed an aggressive stance looking at the inflatable dog. The dog sensed the other dog as another intruder.

“Do you think my inflate-a-mate will keep our dog busy?”

“Not for long, lets get out of this tree and into the house.” They both climbed down and dashed towards the service entrance. They pushed up against the house wall, breathless. Steele smelled his fingers.

“At least the meat smell is keeping me from falling asleep. Remind me to buy another one when we get through this.”

“Gotcha ya.”

“Have you got the glass cutting torch?”

“Check.” Wolfe pulled it out from his utility belt “Watch this, I’ve been practicing. I can cut through the glass in ten seconds straight.” Wolfe put on the goggles and turned on the torch, ready to cut.

“Wolfe!”

“What?” He turned his head.

“The screen door is open.” Steele slid the door open. Wolfe turned off the torch.

“I never get to use the cool toys.”

They crossed the threshold and entered a receiving area for kitchen supplies. Wolfe approached a door that led into the kitchen. He had the spy ear over his right ear and motioned to Steele that he doesn’t hear any sounds ahead of them.

“I don’t know why you get to wear the spy ear?” complained Steele.

“We already discussed it. My secret agent roles give me the most experience.” He was distracted as he opened the kitchen door and a red-light flashes from the doorframe to signify the alarm has been triggered.

“Crap,” yelled Wolfe, “Now you got to make the call or security will call here first and alert Vansome.”

“All right, I’m ready” Steele composed himself and touched a redial number on his cell phone.

“Good morning, TriCorp Security. May have your name and reason for your call?” a voice on the other end asked.

Steele prepares his best Vansome voice. “Yes, this is Blaze Vansome in Beverly Hills on Shoreview. One of my ‘associates’,” Steele looked over at Wolfe, “has accidentally triggered the alarm and I wanted to cancel it.”

“Your password please,” the security attendant asks.

“Yes, my password is ‘I’m number one’,” Steele rolled his eyes at Blaze’s arrogant password.

“That’s correct Mr Blaze but the phone you are calling on is not one of the numbers we have on file. We’ll still have send a car down.” Steele froze. Then he raised his voice to an angry pitch.

“Listen, I’m only going to say this once. I have a new cell phone number. You need to add it to your security lists and charge me the extra billing. I am entertaining a guest and I don’t need any interruptions. If you send a car down, I will cancel my service with TriCorp and blame it on, what’s you’re your name?”

Ah..... Benson sir”

“Benson, I have confirmed the alarm and my password with you, I will consider this matter closed. Do I may my self clear?”

“Crystal sir. It’s just a matter of procedure sir. We do it for your own security you know.”

“Benson!”

“Yes sir, no problem. We’re in the middle of our shift change right now. If you could call later and add the phone number to your files it would be appreciated, Mr. Vansome.

“Good night.”

“Good night sir.”

Steele closed the phone and Wolfe slapped him on the back.

“Wow, you were a pro. You’ve got Vansome’s character down to an art. Maybe you’re not such a bad actor after all, you sure can play a jerk well.”

“Come’s with years of experience,” replied Steele. Let’s go.”

They entered the kitchen and turned into the main foyer. The hallway was long and foreboding. They faced a large oak door.

“Okay, according to the security map, his office is right here.” The door was unlocked and as they stepped, Wolfe’s flashlight danced around the walls. Steele leaned up against the wall and closed his eyes.

“Don’t fall asleep,” Wolfe hit Steele again. Steel tried to stay alert.

“Well, I won’t be sleepy if you weren’t such a bad aim and shot me! What the hell are we looking for again?” demanded Steele.

“Paperwork that connects the lawyers that were harassing Tassel to Vansome.”

“What if there’s nothing written down?”

“Has to be, crime’s a business, there’s always a receipt somewhere. Remember Capone went to jail because of tax evasion.”

“Comparing Vansome to Capone is a pretty big leap!”

“True but you know how this town works. We don’t need anything substantial just enough to get the authorities involved. The press will eat him alive after that, guilty or innocent.”

“What if Vansome isn’t the one? “

“He’s got to be. It’s too much of a coincidence. The night he tries to bash our faces in, someone threatens our movie backer.” The two of them searched the room. Steele scanned through papers on the desk. He stopped as if he found something

“I’ve got it!” He held up a piece of paper.

“What does it say?” asked Wolfe.

“It says I’m a very bad actor and I am responsible for a lot bad movies.”

“Be serious for a minute and find something.”

“Wolfe, if he has anything of interest, it’s probably in safe somewhere. Isn’t it on the map?”

“No, just security alarms and house schematics. Must be a different contractor who put the safe in.”

“Great, maybe we can get Vansome to show us where he puts all of his incriminating papers?” He looked at the couch. “I think I’m going to lie down for a minute.” He cuddled up on the couch. Wolfe kicked him off and Steele thumped to the floor.

“Ow, did you have to do that!”

“Do you want to fall asleep and wake up to Vansome or one of his bodyguards?”

“That’s a nightmare,” he shuddered, “all right, that image woke me up.”

“Shut up, did you hear something?” Wolfe turned around.

“I don’t know. You’re got the spy ear on.”

They both stopped moving and shut off their flashlights. They heard the approach of footsteps in the hallway.

“Quick, hide!”

They both stumbled around; Wolfe and Steele raced behind the couch and bumped their heads as they hid. The door opened and a crack of light shined in from the hallway. They peered up from under

the couch, watching the person enter the room. A hand touched the wall and the light switch was flipped. Vansome stepped behind his desk and grabbed a female statue by the breast. The breast twisted right in his hands. A panel in the floor revealed a safe.

“Classy,” Steele whispered.

Vansome approached the floor and turned the tumblers to open the safe. He took out several legal looking documents and ledgers.

“They better be happy with these,” said Vansome. He closed the panel and walked back to the door. He was about to turn off the light when he sniffed the air.

“Why does it smell like ground beef in here?”

Wolfe and Steele stared at each other. Steele sat on his hands to prevent the smell from further spreading around the room. Vansome stepped towards the couch to look behind the armrest.

“Hey boss, are you ready with the papers?” The voice from outside asked.

“I’m bringing them,” he headed out the door and switched off the light. A slap on the face rang in the hallway.

“No more letting those dogs in the house. Their stink is all over this place.”

“But Blaze we haven’t.” Another slap. The door to the outside closed and the sound of feet on gravel gradually dissipated.

Wolfe and Steele stood up and scanned out the window of the office. Vansome was walking to the door of a stretch limo with two dark figures standing beside him. The one-way mirror window rolls down, but it was too dark to see who was inside.

“What do you think that’s all about?” asked Steele.

“Well, I have a feeling whatever incriminating papers we need are in that car,” answered Wolfe.

“Great, we spent all this time trying in get into the house. How we’re going to get by that dog on the way out?” wondered Steele.

Vansome watched the window roll up and the car rolled away. The gates opened and the limo drove out. Crash and Burn stood beside Vansome.

“What was all that about Blaze?” asked Burn.

“Our partner doesn’t trust me on certain manners of our business plan.”

“Why didn’t you just say no?”

Vansome gave Burn a piercing stare.

“Sometimes you have to give the devil her due. Do you want to mess with those people?”

“No way.” They are interrupted by the sound of barking. Blaze stared at his two bodyguards.

“Will you two go shut those dogs up? They’ve been making a ton of noise all night. What’s wrong with them?”

“They found a squirrel’s nest yesterday. They are probably barking at that,” added Crash.

“Check it out and then call security to make sure there’s been no security breaches.

Suddenly the rottweiler came out of the bushes with the torn-up inflatable dog in its mouth. Its head was shaking furiously as it ripped the blow-up apart. Vansome gaped at the toy and turned to Crash and Burn in a fury.

“How many times have I told you not to give toys to the dogs?”

He slapped both of them.

“Get rid of that toy!” Vansome went back into the house.

“Why did you give the toy to T-bone?” Crash yelled at Burn.

“I didn’t do it, I THOUGHT YOU DID IT!”

“Likely story, you get the toy!”

“No, you get it!”

They both encircle T-Bone who snarled at them.

“Here boy,” coaxed Crash. T-bone ran back into the bushes with his treasure.

Wolfe and Steele climbed down from the wall and landed on the street outside of Blaze’s home. They rushed to their car.

“All right, what’s the plan?” asked Steele.

“Let’s follow the limo and see where it takes us. Maybe by then we can figure out a way to get those papers.”

Wolfe revved the engine and drove to the main entrance. The gates had just closed, and the limo was driving towards Rodeo Drive. Wolfe steered the car slowly behind them.

James Kochanoff

“Are you sure you can tail these guys without being noticed?” Steele asked.

“Ah come on. Didn’t you see me in my movie ‘The Driver,’ I was the invisible man of car drivers, nighttime will be much easier for me to blend in.” The limo drove on ahead as Wolfe stopped at a stoplight.

“Hey, they’re disappearing, while we’re sitting at a red light. You’re going to lose them invisible man.”

“Relax, there’s always another set of lights straight ahead that will slow them down. We’ll catch up to them.” Their light turned green and they continued their pursuit.

“You’re a real pro, Wolfe. What’s your secret?”

Wolfe tapped his forefinger at his head.

“Concentration, my friend. I focus on the target and I block all other cars out of my mind. It’s very Zen like, Pang would like this approach.”

“Well Zen master, I can’t even see them up there. Are you sure we haven’t lost them?”

“Relax, we’ll catch up, how many stretch limos are out on a night like this?”

On the opposite side of the street, another limo drove by.

“Wolfe this is Beverly Hills, every other car is a stretch limo!”

“Okay, okay I’ll speed up!” He accelerated to catch up with their quarry.

The lights of Beverly Hills shone in the early morning sky as the nightlife was in full force. As they drove through the main streets of Beverly Hills, they saw more expensive cars per capita than any place in the world. They turned onto Wilshire Boulevard and heard the nightlife noise of partiers and revellers who can afford fifty-dollar drinks. The stretch limo in the distance pulled over in front of an Italian restaurant. Wolfe and Steele parked on a side street well back of the eatery. Two large suited men stepped out of the limo first, scouting the area out.

“Who do you think is going to come out of the backseat, The Godfather?” Wolfe said in a deep voice.

“Naw, the godfather is passé, I say some guy looking like Tony Soprano comes out.

“You want make a bet?”

“You’re on loser.”

They stared across the street and watched a man in a green suit with short-cropped blond hair

open the back door. One leg pulled out followed by another long shapely leg. As she stepped out, an elegant business suit complimented her slender legs. Her body was voluptuous with long black hair pulled back into a bun. Her mouth was pulled back in a frown as she yelled something uncomplimentary to her driver. Her looks could actually kill. She pointed at the door as her entourage crossed into the restaurant.

“Wow, they don’t make the mafia like they used to,” commented Steele.

“She’s beautiful!”

“And deadly, don’t let her beauty fool you. She’s a rattlesnake ready to strike.”

“Well, call me a snake charmer, let’s go in there.” Wolfe jumped out of the car and walked

towards the restaurant. Steele followed and pulled Wolfe back.

“What are you doing? She and her guys are killers. What are you going to do; walk up to her and buy her a drink?” asked Steele. Wolfe just smiled.

The restaurant was about one-third full. The smell of fresh pasta permeated throughout the air. The kitchen was open to the restaurant as a chef was stirring a pot of tomato sauce. The Italian flag was flown patriotically from the ceiling as famous movies posters of Italian descent hung on the walls. Wolfe and Steele were sitting at the bar by a piano. They were watching a waiter walk over to the Mafia table that was perched on an upper level above the other patrons. The waiter showed a bottle of wine at the table to the businesswoman and then pointed back at Wolfe and Steele. Wolfe toasted his glass back to her while Steele tapped his fingers on the bar.

“This is stupid, I say we go shake those guys up. She’ll give us answers after her boys are lying on the floor,” commanded Steele.

“Relax, show some class,” Wolfe beamed toward the table. “The best way to get answers is ask questions. Remember my detective

movie ‘Hollywood Heat’, I always got to the truth by asking the crooks if they committed the crime.”

Steele grabbed Wolfe, “We’re not in movies anymore, and we don’t get a second take at this if we screw it up.”

“Keep your cool and we’ll get through this. Let a good bottle of wine get us to the root of our problems.”

One of the suits stood up and signaled them to come over. Wolfe strode over to the table with Steele in tow. Before they got to the upper landing, they were motioned to stop as two gorillas in suits frisked them for weapons. One of them was the blond-haired man in the green suit. They were very thorough in their search.

“Man, how about dinner and movie first, if you’re going to get this close.” Wolfe joked.

“That’s it, get them angry, next time make fun of their Italian roots.” Steele commented. The blond hair green suit looked at Steele, he was not Italian. “What are you, a mafia want-to-be?” The suit stood at the edge of the stairs preventing Steele and Wolfe from joining their host. Wolfe approached the woman.

“I hope you’ll enjoy the wine, allow us to introduce ourselves. I’m Wolfe Neilson and my partner is ...

“I know who you are ... the businesswoman returned a cold stare. “The question is do you know who I am?”

“Well our mutual friend Blaze Vansome recommended that we come see you,” Wolfe replied.

“I find that hard to believe, considering that he hates your guts.”

“Oh, so you do know him. Maybe friend isn’t the right word, I guess colleague is more the correct term.”

“I doubt very much he would mention the name Julia Sembrodi to you.”

“Julia, such a beautiful name, mind if we join you for supper?” Wolfe tried to sit down at the table and was stopped by one of the suits.

“Let me guess why you are here tonight, interrupting my very private meal in my very own restaurant? The answer to your question is no,” Sembrodi said curtly. Steele looked over at Wolfe.

“What if the question was, could I have these two famous action stars leave without offering them supper?” Steele replied.

Julia laughed. "You're cut from the same cloth as Vansome, full of yourself."

"Hey there's no need to insult us like that," Wolfe answered.

"Vansome and I have a business arrangement, nothing more. Nothing personal. I make no apologies if my business decisions effect your careers."

"I'm getting the feeling that she's not a fan?" Steele nudged Wolfe.

"Let me give you one piece of advice, I have no idea how you came upon my partnership, but your first visit is free. Bother me again and you'll never act in another movie."

The man in the green suit dragged out a huge bowie knife.

"Need any further clarification, mate?" he said with an Australian accent.

Both Steele and Wolfe backed up a step.

"No, you've made your position crystal clear. But there is just one problem," added Wolfe.

"Problem?" echoed Steele. Wolfe glared at Sembrodi straight in the eyes.

"You're the only thing that stands between us having our careers back. Just break this one deal with Vansome and we'll go away."

"Or else?" Julia was amused.

"How about I demonstrate?" replied Steele.

"We'll expose your stronghold tactics to the police. We have 'documentation'," Wolfe bluffed, pretending he had copies of the papers that Blaze gave to Julia earlier tonight. She stood up from the table with coldness in her eyes.

"Don't make threats you can't backup." She looked at the green suit. "Oz, remove them". Oz nodded his head and motioned to two of the suits to accompany the actors out of the restaurant.

"I knew talking was a waste of time!" said Steele. He leapt over a table and borrowed a cane from an elderly patron. He swung the cane around smashed the Mafioso in the jaw. The man's head barely flinched; he shook his head and advanced. As he reached Steele, the suit was immediately knocked down on his butt by a kick by Wolfe. Steele nodded at Wolfe in a gesture of thanks.

"Don't let it go to your head, he would have gone for me next," said Wolfe.

“Oh, come on, you know you love me,” replied Steele.

A punch sailed at Steele who ducked, and the fist slammed into the beam behind him.

Steele punched the goon, sending him flying at Wolfe who back fisted him in the face, knocking him to the ground. Wolfe looked at Julia.

“Hey, we’ve not just pretty faces here,” as he surveyed the two fallen bodies of her men. “Now if your guys have had enough, we’ll call it a night.”

Julia clapped her hands. About ten men from several surrounding tables stood up. Obviously, the number of men in her family ran deep.

“Remind me not to eat here,” said Wolfe.

Crash!

Steele flew out the front pane of glass of the restaurant and crashed on the ground near the limo.

Crack!

Wolfe sailed out of the adjacent pane of glass, landing next to Steele. Wolfe shook the glass off of him as he got up. He looked back at the restaurant.

“Why the hell did you have to send me through the glass! He,” Wolfe pointed at Steele, “had already broken the first pane, you could have sent me through that!”

“I don’t think they care about the glass bill,” Steele stood by Wolfe. A couple walked by while watching the commotion.

“The food’s not bad but the service is terrible” Steele shouted to the couple as they scurried away. Julia and Oz came to the broken front window.

“Let’s finish these mates,” as Oz pulled out his gun from his shoulder holster.

Steele and Wolfe backed away. Sirens wailed from a nearby street.

“No, now is not the time,” she placed her hand on the gun to prevent him from shooting. Wolfe couldn’t resist a parting jab.

“That’s awful big of you Julia, considering we have copies of the papers you got from Vansome tonight. You give us a call when you want to bargain.” Wolfe and Steele walked down the street away from the restaurant. Steele punched Wolfe in the arm.

“Why the hell did you say that to her. She’ll come after us now!”

“No, she’s a businesswoman. If she thinks we have something she wants, then she’ll come to us to negotiate.” He tapped his head. “Pretty smart, aren’t I?”

“You’re insane.”

“I’m also hungry, all that pasta has given me an appetite. Let’s get something to eat.”

“Finally, you said something that makes sense,” Steele answered. They jumped into Wolfe’s convertible and drove off towards Westwood Blvd.

Julia watched them leave in the convertible and turned to Oz.

“Find their home addresses and make sure they have an accident. I’ll be staying here for my alibi.”

“How bad an accident do you want those blokes to have?” Oz grinned.

“Make it fatal,” Julia answered.

Chapter 11

Speed

Westwood Boulevard – Denny’s Restaurant

4 am

“Well, that went better than expected,” stated Wolfe as he finished a plateful of greasy eggs and bacon. Steele hit him in the arm from across the booth causing him to drop his fork.

“You’re crazy Wolfe, we almost got killed tonight and we pissed off a mafia crime lord. If they don’t kill you, the grease in your meal will.” Steele had a nutritional sandwich with a salad on the side.

“With the health food you eat, I say you are living a slow death anyway. You worry to much.”

The waitress walked towards them and stood by Wolfe.

“Anything else I can get you this morning?” she flirted with Wolfe.

“I think you’ve handled all my food needs.” He winked back. She laughed and moved on to the next table.

“Is there anything female on two legs that you don’t hit on?” Steele asked.

“Hey girls can flirt all the time, why can’t I? Life’s too short Steele, you need to chill out. What’s wrong, are still thinking about Madison?”

“That she-bitch! Don’t you worry, she’s all yours.”

“Stop sending everyone you meet your superior life form vibes. Nobody ever measures up to the great Steele Taylor, do they? Either they’re too weak, too ugly, too stupid....”

“That’s not true, but there’s always room for improvement.”

“Stop judging everyone and enjoy people for what they are. Have some fun.”

“Thanks, remind me to attend your seminars.”

“See, good one, you’re having fun already.”

The two of them climbed back into the convertible. Wolfe put the convertible top on.

“Always been a diner fan?” added Steele looking up at the Denny’s sign.

“It’s close to where I live and open 24 hours a day, what more can you ask? Why don’t you bunk out at my place for a few hours before we plan out our next move?”

“Okay, let’s see if your place is bigger than mine,” Steele replied.

Wolfe drove out of the parking lot and rounded a residential street to his home. They passed a black Audi, which was coming from the opposite direction.

“We accomplished a lot tonight. We know who caused our movie to shut down. Now, she won’t dare touch us as long as she thinks we have a copy of Vansome’s papers. We just have to figure out how to get those papers from her before she figures out, we don’t have them,” explained Wolfe.

“If she hasn’t already put a hit on us. When we get to your place, I’m checking the perimeter first. I keep thinking she’s going to jump out and kill the two of us!”

“Chill out! You’ve been in too many movies. What will you think of next? Maybe she’s going to rub us out at a busy intersection?” They coasted to stoplight and stopped. The black Audi pulled up next to them.

“No, you’re right, I’m making too much of this.”

The Audi’s windows were tinted black; there was no way to see inside. A window rolled down and Steele causally looked over as a shotgun aimed at their heads.

“Down!” Steele yelled and grabbed Wolfe’s head down as the first shot sailed over their heads and through the side window.

“Go!” screamed Steele as Wolfe raised his head to steer while Steele pushed on Wolfe’s accelerator foot, squealing the car though the intersection. A second shot took out the back window causing it to explode sending glass everywhere as Wolfe steered onto a main street. The black Audi followed in pursuit. Steele was still down by Wolfe’s legs.

“I think you can get up now,” as Wolfe steered towards a highway overpass. “You’re making me kind of nervous down there,” Wolfe pointed to his crotch. Steele leapt up with in anger.

“How can you joke around; we almost had our heads blown off? We have to get to the police.” Wolf turned onto the 405 Highway and saw the black Audi in his rear-view mirror.

“My cell phone’s dead, it should be home charging. Where’s yours,” asked Steele.

“Grab my cell phone from the back seat and call 911 for help.” Steele reached back and pulled out the phone.

“You mean this phone?” He yanked out the remains of a phone with circuits hanging out and bullet hole through it.

“All right, screw that idea. We got to get to a phone.”

“Oh right, how about we pull over to the next gas station, make a phone call and tell our friends,” Steele pointed back as the black Audi was closing in on them, “to hold off a few minutes while we make our call.”

“You’re full of criticisms, how about you come up with an idea while I drive.”

“Do you know where any police stations are?”

“Not a clue.”

“Great, it’s too early in the morning for any traffic to help.” Steele snaps his fingers. “Okay, I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

“How about you drive like crazy and lose these guys.”

“What would I do without you here to guide me?” Wolfe said sarcastically.

“Wait, give me a minute to think.” The black Audi was closing the gap. “You got any firepower in this heap?”

Wolfe’s eyes brightened up. “We live in Los Angeles, don’t we? Open the glove compartment.”

Steele reached in to pull out a 500 Smith and Wesson Magnum. He opened the magazine and spun the barrel.

“Sweet, you like your guns big. Let’s see these mafia boys suck on a few of these.” Steele loaded the gun. The black Audi drove closer and a shotgun aimed out of the side window.

Blam! A shotgun shell took out the back window.

“Jesus, where the hell is LA’s finest when you need them?”

“You could try to drive by a donut stand.”

“Will you take a shot at them. Blast the windshield or tires out.”

“No problem.”

Steele aimed point blank at the Audi’s windshield.

Bing! The bullet ricocheted off the windshield.

“What the hell!”

He took another shot at the hood to hit the engine.

Ping! The bullet bounced off.

“What did you buy, rubber bullets?” He emptied the magazine on the Audi with no effect. Steele banged the gun on the dashboard in frustration.

“Damn it, our mafia pals must have a bullet proof car. I can’t slow them down.”

“Never mind, we got worse problems ahead,” Wolfe pointed in front of them.

“What can be worse than gun happy goons chasing us?” asked Steele still fiddling with the gun. “I hate this,” he dropped several bullets under the seat, “I never had to reload in the movies.”

“How about gun happy goons in front of us! Look!”

A black hummer was parked on a highway overpass. Several men stood with rifles in hand while two more were tying rope lines.

“What the hell are they doing?” Steele realized they were caught in a trap

“Duck,” he yelled.

Two men dressed in paratrooper uniforms leap off the opposite side of the overpass, using their rope momentum to sail out below with guns blaring directly at the convertible. Their bullets riddled the hood. As the gunmen passed overhead, Steele raised his head and aimed. He shot one of the paratroopers who went limp but missed the second who remained firing. Steele screamed and hit Wolfe.

“What the hell! You said that they wouldn’t come after us and now its World War Three!”

“All right, so I misjudged her. What do you want me to do? Call her up and apologize!”

“Apologize to her, how about apologize to me. I wouldn’t be in this mess if it wasn’t for you.”

“Hey no one put a gun to your head!”

Steele had a brainstorm and pointed the gun at Wolfe’s head.

“Stop the car!”

“Jesus Steele, I’m sorry all right. Don’t wave a gun in my face!”

“Do it Wolfe!”

“Are you crazy, they’ll catch us and kill us! Do you have a death wish?”

“Stop the car, now!

Wolfe pressed the brake and the car lurched to a stop.

“Don’t move!” Steele yelled.

The black Audi whizzed by exposing the gunman in the window. Steele focused and a bullet flew by Wolfe and hitting the gunman causing him to collapse. Another hand dragged the body back into the car.

“Steele! Any closer and you would have parted my hair. Are you sure you weren’t aiming for me?”

“I was tempted.” Steele gazed behind him. The black hummer had left the overpass followed by two black vans. They were closing distance between them and their convertible.

“Drive!” yelled Steele

Wolfe screeched his tires and accelerated towards the black Audi.

“All right the odds just got decidedly in their favour, what do we do?”

Steel rubbed his chin, trying to think.

“We got to outlast them, we got at least five to ten minutes before the cops show up. This much fire power has got to attract attention.”

“Ten minutes? If our friends are thinking the exact same thing, don’t you think they’re going to rush things?”

The black Audi came to a screeching stop ahead, turning sideways to semi block the highway. A new gunman replaced the one that was shot. Both vans opened side doors with rifles from the service road.

“Wolfe take this exit, now!” Steele grabbed the wheel and forced Wolfe to make a sharp turn to barely make the off ramp.

“Hey, I am the driver. Keep an eye on our friends,” Wolfe yelled.

“You’re welcome, I just made sure we didn’t get out faces shot off.”

“I’m getting the distinct feeling like we’ve being herded in a certain direction.”

“Why, where does this exit take us?”

“To the dock yards. We’re running out of real estate fast!”

The black hummer followed the convertible down the off ramp. At the top, the two black vans turned down different streets to surround the

area. The morning sun peeks out from the ocean giving a slight illumination to the San Pedro dockyards. Wolfe saw several long warehouses in the distance and drove towards them.

“What’s the plan? I’ve got two bullets left and we have an army chasing us with an enough firepower to take over a small city,” Steele asked.

“Did you ever see my movie ‘The Impossible Escape,’ where I break out of prison and on the run from the police?”

“I must have missed that one. What did you do?”

“Watch this.” Wolfe drove towards the warehouses.

Several minutes later, one of the black vans raced around the corner of a warehouse. The driver saw the convertible with Wolfe and Steele looking back towards him. The van accelerated in close pursuit. Wolfe sped up, remaining just ahead of the van twisting around buildings on the pier. The convertible turned another corner and in the middle of the laneway, a long steel chain is lashed to beams in the warehouses at opposite ends. In the middle of the pavement, two wooden posts prop the chain high enough off the ground for a low car to drive under. Slowing the car down, Wolfe drove his convertible under the chain, and pulled the post off the ground. Steele opened up his door and grabs his post on his right. The chain dropped lower with more slack but is now too low for a vehicle to drive under.

The van saw the chain at the last second, but the occupants don’t have enough time to react. The chain fused itself to the undercarriage slamming the van to a stop. The van’s rear end went vertical and two bodies flew out of the van’s windshield. Wolfe pumped the brakes and circled the convertible back to the accident.

“We need some firepower. Let’s see what these guys were packing,” said Steele.

Wolfe stopped the convertible near the wreckage and Steele tentatively approached the van. He stepped over the bodies and pulled the side door open on the van. There are no other passengers but boxes of weapons.

“We got grenades!” Steele said from inside the van.

“Hurry up and grab them, we don’t have much time,” answered Wolfe.

Steele jumped out of the van with a box full of grenades and was face to face with a not so dead gunman. He cursed himself for not checking the men on the pavement. It may be his last mistake.

“Movie’s over!” the gunman pointed his gun at Steele. A shot exploded and a bullet ripped into flesh. Steele grabbed his chest; he felt very serene. “I never thought it would feel like this,” he stated. He took his hand away from his chest expecting blood but saw nothing. The gunman fell to the ground with a fresh bullet hole gaping through his chest. Wolfe had his gun straddled over the back seat with his gun pointing at the van.

“You saved my life,” said Steele.

“Don’t remind me! Good thing you didn’t use those last two bullets.” The other van was approaching in the distance. “Let’s go.”

They drove away as the other van came to a screaming stop behind the first van. They fired shots at the speeding convertible but because the chain was still intact, they were unable to pursue.

“Listen, I want to tell you something.”

“Can this wait, we kind of have a situation here,” commented Wolfe.

“I got to get this off my chest now, because we might not get to it later. I know sometimes I can come off as a bit of a jerk.” Steele got a look from Wolfe. “All right a big jerk, to a lot of people. I’m not just taking it out on you.”

“Well that makes it all right.”

“Shut up, I’m trying to say thank you for saving my life back there.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sure you would have done the same thing for me.” Steele was silent.

“Right Steele?”

Steele laughed “Of course.”

“You’re almost human at times like this Steele.”

“And you’re almost bearable at times when you’re sober.”

“Touché.”

“Now your chain trick back there reminds me of a stunt I pulled in one of my movies. Want to try it?”

“I’m all ears.”

Wolfe was driving alone in the convertible. The second van was rapidly approaching in the opposite direction. Wolfe gunned the accelerator towards the van in a classic game of chicken. The van sped up. A rifle extended from one of the van's windows. Wolfe's head in the driver's seat was almost in the sights of the rifle's scope. The shooter aimed and a finger tugged on the trigger. Wolfe swung the car ninety degrees down another warehouse lane while the van passed the lane and braked to a screeching stop. The van backed up and turned down the laneway, giving chase.

High above the laneway on the metal scaffolding at the end of the pier, Steele climbed up into the rafters with a bundle of grenades. He held them precariously and almost lost his balance. A gunshot from the van at Wolfe distracted Steele's attention and he dropped one of the grenades to the ground. Steele closed his eyes, expecting the grenade to explode on impact.

Bonk! It bounced harmlessly on the ground below and tumbled to the side of the laneway. Steele started breathing again. Wolfe drove below narrowly missing running over the grenade. The van followed behind in hot pursuit. Steele gazed down at his hands; a huge wad of duct tape was wrapped around five grenades. Steele watched the advancing van, pulled one pin out of a grenade and dropped the bundle. The grenades fell through the air, their shadow racing to the van below. The bundle land on the roof rack of the van and the sticky tape lodges itself on the passenger's side. The van skidded to a stop. A suit slid the door open and stood on the edge of the van to look onto the top of the van. His hands felt around the top of the van and find the bundle. He pulled the bundle closer and saw the grenades. Before he could react, they explode, the concussive force sent the van and occupants into the air. The blast sent the van off the edge of the pier into ocean. The fiery remains burned on the water's surface.

Wolfe turned the convertible around the corner as Steele dropped down from his perch. Wolfe picked up the grenade that dropped as Steele approached the car.

"You missed one," he tossed it Steele. "How did you keep them all together?"

“Amazing what you can do with a little duct tape.” Steele jumped into the car.

“Still got some grenades left?” Wolfe asked Steele.

“You bet.”

“Good, we’re going to need them!”

The sound of gunfire riddled off the steel warehouse beams behind them. The black Audi approached, gaining ground quickly. Several fresh bullet holes find their way into in the trunk of the convertible.

Wolfe slams the accelerator to the floor.

“You know I’m still holding out for the cops to show.”

“Well, don’t look over there.”

As they drove down the pier, they saw through the open warehouse with the black hummer with several machine guns firing at them. The bullets slam into the concrete in the center of the warehouse preventing Steele and Wolfe from getting hit. In between beams they see the hummer racing to cut them off. Behind them, the Audi closed off their only escape.

“They’re boxing us in!”

“There’s got to be a way out.”

“Better think of it fast, look!”

The pier was coming to an end with only two ways out; cross and meet the hummer or turn around and face the Audi. Wolfe does the only thing he can think of, he sped up.

“What the hell, slow down or we’re going right off the dock into the ocean!”

Wolfe looked at Steele as if to say “So?”

“I was afraid you were going insane without having a drink.”

“Hold on!”

The car hit the barrier at the end of the pier and flew into the air. The engine revved as the wheels spun with no friction from the ground. There was another pier on the other side that the car tried to reach.

Kaboom! The convertible never made the other side as it comes slamming in a container trailer hanging from a crane. The car exploded on impact and the debris fell onto the pier and into the ocean below. Both the Audi and hummer come to screeching stop before the carnage.

Oz, still in his green Giorgio suit, stepped out of the hummer. He went to the edge of a pier and looked into the ocean. The water swallowed the last of the car. His foot kicked some debris on the pavement. He bent down and picked up the hood ornament from the convertible.

“Looks like someone took a long walk off a short pier,” he drawled with his Australian accent. He flipped open his cell phone and hit redial.

“It’s Oz, those blokes are gone. We gave them a burial at sea,” he paused, listening to the other end. “I’m sure they’re dead but there isn’t enough remains to return a trophy.” He laughed at Julia’s answer. “Those mates won’t be making anymore bad movies. We’re coming in.” He closed the cell phone and motioned to the Audi to leave and for the one gunman to get into the hummer.

“Movie stars,” he shook his head, “there’ll be no sequel.” He threw the hood ornament into the water. Oz stepped into the Hummer and the vehicle drove off.

The ocean water twirled into a whirlpool with the car dragging itself to the bottom of the harbour. Bits of debris and flames from the gas burned on the surface. Shadows appeared over the water as Wolfe and Steele looked down on the devastation.

“I’m going to miss that car. The bastard even threw away my one keepsake.”

“We were lucky we weren’t in it!”

“Luck’s got nothing to do with it. I pulled the same stunt in my movie, ‘Hostile Invasion’. It’s all about scouting your area and using misdirection to focus their attention. He cradled his hands and suddenly a coin appeared at Steele’s ear from Wolfe’s fingers.

“Cheap trick. Don’t give up your day job,” Steele replied.

“But effective.”

“I was a bit nervous jumping out of the car at the last second and hiding in that dumpster,” he pointed at the side of the warehouse. “I didn’t like being in the open for those thugs.”

“We made it didn’t we?”

“Good thing none of those guys watch your movies.”

Wolfe was puzzled for a second and then considered Steele's words.

"You're right, good thing you didn't say that to me before we jumped." They moved away from the crash site and walked down the laneway travelling away from the accident. "Maybe I should be insulted that organized crime is not watching my flicks."

"Don't, or neither one of us could have gotten away with the stunts we pulled," consoled Steele. Wolfe heard sirens in the distance. Steele threw up his arms.

"Finally, the cops show up. I can't wait to explain the whole story to them and get some protection."

Wolfe grabbed Steele by the shoulder.

"Wait. Let's just say hypothetically that the police believe our story and don't lock us away for twenty years for public mischief."

"I'm listening."

"Do you think that our mafia crime lord has any cops on the take in the department?"

"In LA's finest, you know the answer to that," Steele looked at Wolfe. "If that's the case, we're sitting ducks for a mysterious witness accident. If it's a mistake to go to the police, what do we do?"

"These goons think we're dead, let's stay that way until we can figure out what our next step is."

"We're hunted men, who can we turn to trust?" asked Steele. "We don't actually have faces that we can hide."

"I've got an idea! He's not my first choice but I think he'll give us good advice on what to do."

"Who do you have in mind?" wondered Steele.

Pang's face was a picture of tranquility as he mediated in a small temple illuminated by the morning sun. His home was nestled in Malibu hills, hidden from view and isolated in the woods but only minutes away from the lunacy of Los Angeles. It was a one-story ranch style home with a rock garden surrounded by immaculately groomed shrubs. Connected to the house was an Asian temple where Pang sat in the center; his legs were crossed in a lotus position. He dabbed his fingers into a plate of oil and chanted under his breathe a language only

spoken by ancient healers. He made finger movements through the air as if spelling the words of some obscure language. Shadows waned and stretched in morning rays. Pang turned to his right as a hand reached over to cover his mouth.

He calmly grabbed the fingers and twisted them down, bringing Steele to the floor.

“Let go! I just wanted to see if I could sneak up on you,” he struggled to stand back up.

“I’ve had elephants walk up the path quieter than the two of you. Your massive egos are matched by your physical mannerisms.”

“You have elephants here?” Steele asked not understanding the analogy.

“What brings you to my home unannounced,” Pang sternly responded.

“We need your help,” pleaded Wolfe.

“Continue.”

“After the movie was shut down, we went to see the financial backer to get him to change his mind. “

“We found out that someone was trying to pressure him into pulling his support,” interjected Steele.

“Since we just fought with Blaze Vansome during our ‘dress’ rehearsal the night before, we started with him and decided to break into his house.”

“Obviously,” responded Mr. Pang with a touch of sarcasm.

“He’s connected with a ruthless mafia crime lord.”

“You left out attractive in a violent sort of way,” Wolfe screwed up his face on the word ‘violent’.

“She’s had a business arrangement with Vansome to shut our picture down.”

“And Julia Sembrodi all business!”

“She took papers from Vansome’s house that will prove her illegal tactics against our main backer.” Pang held up his hand to signify an end to the story and a chance for him to talk.

“You dealt with her in a professional manner to change her mind?” he inquired. Both looked at each other and with some hesitation Wolfe responded.

“Our first meeting didn’t go well. Her goon squad tried to kill us and now she thinks we’re dead.”

“Interesting. Why come to me?” Steele and Wolfe gaped at each other uncomfortably waiting for the other to continue.

“You’re a good teacher and we hoped you’d have a rational opinion on our next step,” Wolfe replied.

“And what would I receive in return?” Silence met Pang as neither expected this reply.

“Pang you didn’t strike us as the materialistic type. We’re not flush with money right now, but we can pay you something with the balance after the movie production,” answered Steele.

Pang stood and shook his head with disapproval.

“Disappointing. Once again you have put your values on what I want. Did you learn nothing from my training?”

“Whoa, relax Pang. It’s a pretty universal to think someone wants money for assistance,” Wolfe answered. “I’m sure this house wasn’t built on wisdom and good fortune. Why don’t you tell us what you want?” Pang paced around the two of them.

“Very well, for my assistance, I require one thing from the both of you.”

“Yes,” they answered together.

“Something from here,” he pointed to his brain to signify knowledge.

“That leaves Steele out,” laughed Wolfe.

“Enough,” replied Steele. “No riddles Pang, what does this,” he pointed to his head, “mean?” Pang slowly walked around his dojo.

“Your training was to provide you with an answer. An answer that would be a step in solving your problems.”

“But we’ve been there, every time we give you answer, you say that’s not the right answer? What the hell we’re we supposed to learn from your exercises?”

“Pang, I don’t understand what you are trying to teach us, but I do appreciate the effort you spent on training,” Wolfe bowed his head to Pang as a sign of respect.

“Me too,” Steele bowed as well, “but I can’t see the connection in humiliating us by wearing women’s clothes, sweating it in the sauna in

those fur coats, the wooden blocks. I figured you were getting your kicks by taking us down a peg!”

“And what does embarrassment teach you?” asked Pang.

“Well, it makes me as uncomfortable as hell.”

“I wanted to punch you in the nose for putting us through it!” Pang peered at both of them.

“Stop, you are still making the same mistakes. Start concentrating. Think about your experiences, what did you learn from them?”

Steele and Wolfe sat in silence; then Steele piped up.

“Well, as embarrassing as it was to dress up as a woman, it didn’t compare to the girl getting slugged by her boyfriend. My problems look small in comparison.”

“The kid I met had problems much bigger than mine.”

“And these situations taught you what?” Pang was hopefully.

“I guess despite my suffering, there is always someone worse off.”

“Even with my drinking problem, I’ve got the money to fight it if I want to. Even jackass Steele helped clean up my act.”

“I realized I don’t have any real friends, but I can change. Wolfe’s competition pushed me; it was good to have someone to help.”

“Is the lesson that our problems don’t compare to the problems of most people?”

“Or helping doesn’t always have to benefit us?” Steele adds.

Pang stood still, looking at the two of them with emotionless eyes. Then he clapped, loud and slowly.

“Very good, finally both of you realize that you are not the centers of the world. Other people’s problems eclipse your own. Begin life’s journey by looking outside of your own needs.” Steele and Wolfe stared at Pang in amazement.

“That’s it? You would have stopped punishing us if we had just discussed some else’s problems?” Steele’s mouth hung open in disbelief. He punched Wolfe in the shoulder.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why didn’t I? Hey, I can be just as shallow as you,” Wolfe replied and faced Pang.

“Okay, Pang we learned your lesson. Have we earned your help? What should we do? This woman is connected. If we go to the police,

there's a chance someone on her payroll will kill us before we have a chance to prove her guilt."

Pang wandered the deck of the dojo and watched the rising sun.

"You say this woman has papers that will incriminate her?"

"Yes, but we don't know where she would keep them. She's deadly and the next time we make a mistake with her, we're not coming back. Where would she hide those documents?"

"Could we ask Hamesh to find her home?" suggested Steele.

"What is a Hamesh?" Pang asked.

"A well-connected friend," Wolfe looked over to Steele, "call him up and see if he has any luck in finding her."

In the corner of the dojo sat an end table with a few books and a cell phone. Steele stepped over to pick up the phone. Pang turned his back to the two of them.

"Once again the answer stares you straight in the face," Pang responded.

Both stared at the phone.

"Is someone going to call us with the answer?" Wolfe remarked. Steele looked at the phone.

"Of course, she's a businesswoman. She would keep everything at her office. There must be an address." He searched for her on a browser.

"Bingo! Sembrodi Industries have their head office on Wilshire Boulevard in Century City. I bet the papers are there."

"Steele, this isn't like breaking into Vansome's house. This building will have security, cameras, alarms; the whole nine yards. We can't get into a place like that, it will be guarded like Fort Knox. It's too difficult."

Pang flashed a rare smile as he grabbed his cane.

"With the proper planning anything can be accomplished. Remember difficult does not mean impossible. He pointed his cane at a piece of paper. "This is what you'll need."

The morning was a series of preparations. More money transactions with Hamesh as he got them a schematic of Sembrodi's office tower and a pile of equipment. Wolfe was surprised at Hamesh's ability to find the plans for any building. Hamesh was happy to help, especially

with money involved and dropped the necessary supplies at Pang's home.

The office building was a twenty-second-floor architectural marvel recently built with the latest security measures. Julia Sembrodi's office was in the top floor. Pang pointed to a number of places on the schematic of the building and together they planned a way for them to enter.

Pang insisted on one final exercise before they tackled the building. Steele and Wolfe entered the back yard and stared up at a twenty-foot climbing wall. The wall was imposing with no handholds. It had three-sides with a five-foot wide front with two feet wide sides reaching to the top. The C shape of the wall rose high above the yard to the top of the palm trees. The wood was grey from age with many knots and was rough to touch. Each plank was an inch thick and there was crossbeam of logs supporting the weight from the back. Dynamite would be the only material to bring this solid timber down

"We don't have time for this. Sembrodi Industries will close for the day in a few hours, time's wasting," exclaimed Steele.

"What's the big deal about climbing the wall? Guys in the military do it all the time?"

Before you risk your lives, you must be prepared mentally to take on the challenge. Wolfe, you must first climb the wall." Wolfe looked around.

"Where's the rope?" Without missing a beat, Pang replied, "There is no rope."

"Then how the hell am I supposed to get over, FLY?"

"Maybe you need a few beer and then you'll think you can glide over it," grinned Steele.

"Use your mind," persuaded Pang.

"He'll get far on that," said Steele.

"Here goes nothing," Wolfe took a running leap at the wall getting about eight feet up and falling back to the ground on his butt.

"Graceful," added Steele. Wolfe wiped the dirt off his pants.

"Show us how it's done, fly boy," gestured Wolfe. Steele looked at Pang.

“Give me a boost, I think Pang wants us to help each other.” Pang remained expressionless as Wolfe bent on one knee and cupped his hands to lift Steele.

“It’s not going to be enough, the wall’s too tall,” Wolfe grunted.

“Let me try, maybe I can find a hand hold,” Steele reached for the top of the wall but was still about five feet too short.”

“You’re getting heavy!” yelled Wolfe.

“Okay let me down. I can’t reach the top.” He jumped down.

“Any more good ideas, partner,” Wolfe pushed Steele back against the perpendicular wall that came out from the edge of the main climbing wall.

“I don’t see you coming up with any brainstorms either action star,” Steele pushed back, and Wolfe bumped into the opposite perpendicular wall. Wolfe pushed Steele against the wall pressuring them both against the side walls. Steele stopped first.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Well I was thinking of blowing up the wall and stepping over the debris, but this might work.”

“Let do it!”

They climbed back to back facing away from each other; using the other’s force to grip against the opposite wall. They have inched halfway up the wall by pushing the other to brace themselves. They have to work in unison or with out the other’s force, they would come tumbling down. Each pushed with all of their might to climb higher and to cause as much discomfort to the other.

“I hope we get up there soon, your back is killing me,” strained Wolfe.

“Watch me pull a muscle now and screw up everything.”

“You want some cheese with that wine.”

Wolfe’s hand suddenly grabbed air as they reach the top of their challenge.

“Hey look we did it!” They looked over the wall.

“Congratulations, the two of you worked together to climb the obstacle. Hopefully you are ready for your bigger challenge. You may now descend.” Neither man moves as they looked off into the distance.

“Is something wrong?” Pang asked.

“Just the opposite,” answers Steele, “did you know there is a hot tub next door?”

“Pang, your neighbour is hot!” Wolfe drooled.

Pang shook his head as he walked away, a small smile appeared.

The three of them met inside Pang’s dojo.

“Teamwork will be the success of this operation. Try to go this alone,” he looked at Wolfe and Steele, “and you both will fail!”

“We understand Pang, you have been a big help. We owe you...”

“BIG TIME,” added Wolfe.

“Have you ever thought about acting in our movie? If this works out, we can arrange something for you in our film.” Pang shook his head.

“No, thank you. Your movies are too superficial, it would cause my family dishonour.”

Both Wolfe and Steele laughed; then they faced Pang and bowed.

“Thanks Pang,” they said with genuine respect.

They left with two duffle bags of equipment over their shoulders for their assault. They walked down the pathway through the woods to the roadway.

Pang watched them disappear in the distance. The sun faded and the sky darkened behind a cloud. He picked up his phone and dialed quickly. His grin changed into a frown as he spoke three words into the receiver.

“They’ve leaving now.”

He placed the phone in the receiver and suddenly takes the top part of his cane apart revealing a knife. He turned and threw it dead centre into a bull’s-eye on the wall.

Chapter 12

Die Hard

The huge main lobby of Sembrodi Industries was busy with the hustle of men and women in business suits running to meetings. Large glass chandeliers overlooked a granite floor with the Sembrodi emblem of a snake welded into the floor. Five guards provided the security with metal detectors at all three entrances. It was nearing the end of the day when employees anxiously awaited for their chance to go home.

Suddenly, the fire alarm went off. It's sound was deafening. The lobby became a fevered chaos with office staff spilling out of the stairways and into the main entrance. In the pandemonium, the main door opened as the feet of two dark fireman boots entered. The firemen passed the door and evaded the metal detector as the crowd of people overwhelmed security. Steele was twirling the nozzle on a can of pepper spray in his front jacket pocket.

"Stop playing with that! You'll spray yourself in the eyes. Besides there's no reason for it now," whispered Wolfe as he adjusted his fireman helmet.

"Relax, I'm just being prepared, Hamesh thought it could be useful," answered Steele.

Wolfe looked at the main lettering at the elevator that described the main office on the twenty-second floor. He motioned to Steele.

"All the elevators are out due to the false alarm. Are you ready to climb twenty plus flights of stairs?"

"No problem, but let's be quick before the real fire department arrives." They climbed the stairs, keeping their heads down as a sea of people push around them.

A long five minutes later, two very sweaty faces reached the top. Steele and Wolfe exited through the stairway door and hunched over from their exertion.

"This..... better. ... be the floor. I can't climb anymore!" Steele collapsed in a heap with his heavy duffle bag.

"You can't climb I can't breathe. I'm the one who carried all the heavy stuff!"

"Did not!"

“Did to!”

“Did not!”

An attractive businesswoman scurried by stopping the argument. Wolfe recovered first.

“Who cares, let’s go through the main offices. The whole place should be mostly deserted by now with the alarm.” They rounded a corner to observe a huge space of cubicles and dozens of people working madly on their computers.

“What gives? Does nobody hear the alarm?”

“Maybe they think it’s a false alarm.”

“Or they’re too scared to leave and miss any time. Sembrodi is probably an impossible boss.”

“Look at them,” Wolfe gestured across the room, “they’re so intense on their computer screen they didn’t even notice us walking by.”

“Maybe the penalty for goofing off is pretty high around here,” Steele laughed, “I was scared of organized crime before but now I’m frightened to death on what legitimate business they conduct here!”

“Bean counters rule the world man. There’s more criminal ways to hide under a corporation than any individual crime family could hope for.”

“Enough commentary, where to?”

“The main office should be behind those doors. Follow me.”

As they approached, on their right was a glassed-in boardroom with a large table with young executives discussing the latest Sembrodi products. A large oak desk was located at the end of the hallway and an attractive secretary sat by the door.

“I’ll handle this,” said Wolfe and walked up her. Before he could say a word, she bent down to reach for a pen and showed her ample cleavage. Wolfe grinned.

“Excuse me, we’re with 56th Squadron fire department and we need to investigate each office to determine where the fire has started.”

“Certainly,” she purred, “I always want to help a man in uniform.” She looked at Wolfe a little more closely. “You remind me of someone,” as she brushed her lips with her finger.

“He gets that all the time,” said Steele.

James Kochanoff

“You can check out any of the offices on my right. And if things aren’t hot enough for you there, then please come back to me,” she gestured at Wolfe.

“We need to go into the main offices first,” Wolfe pointed to the left of her desk. She shook her head.

“I’d really like to help,” she played with her hair,” but I’m on strict orders not to let anyone in. Not even for an emergency?”

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can do,” Wolfe leaned closer to her, “to change your mind?”

She giggled. Steele made a gagging sound.

“Well, you are firemen and I certainly wouldn’t want the building to burn down, would I?”

She pressed a button under the desk and the double doors opened into a darkened office.

“Don’t be too long or I’ll have to come in after you,” she winked at Wolfe.

“Be back before you know it,” Wolfe motioned to Steele to follow.

They entered into the dark office and the doors swung shut behind them.

“Wolfe can you turn on a light switch, I can’t see a thing?” Steele asked as he fumbled with a flashlight. Suddenly the shutters on the window swung open illuminating the room blinding both their eyes.

“Here let me help. You’ve been expected,” Julia Sembrodi spun around in her chair by the window to face them. Strong arms on both sides grabbed Steele and Wolfe and pushed them down on the floor.

“Stupid actors. Did you really think you could walk into my headquarters undetected to take these?” She slammed a set of documents onto the desk. “The two of you are as stupid as Vansome. I’ll depose of him someday after the two of you are long forgotten.” Julia snarled.

“Do be hasty! You caught us! Call it a draw and we’ll head back downstairs.” Steele tried to turn around. A gun clicked at his temple. “Or not.”

“You don’t want to kill us and make a mess on your beautiful floor,” remarked Wolfe

The Australian Oz steps from behind them, bent down and positioned the plastic sheet that was placed over the floor.

“No mess at all mate!”

Steele’s hands are pulled back, but he can almost touch the nozzle of a pepper spray in his side pocket.

“Shoot one bullet and you’ll have a roomful of computer nerds knocking down your doors, wondering what’s going on. They saw us come in,” explained Steele. Oz aimed his gun at Steele’s head.

“The room’s soundproof mate. No one can even hear you scream. Any last words?”

“How about this. Go ahead, make my afternoon.”

“Enough melodrama, finish them,” Julia ordered.

Oz pus his gun to Steele’s temple. “See you in the movies,” he smirked.

At that moment, Steele pressed the nozzle on the can with his thumb and sprayed the thug holding him in the eyes. He loosened his grip on Steele who ducked as Oz fired, shooting his own man.

Wolfe used the distraction to kick out the knee of his attacker. Once free, he reached into his fireman’s jacket and threw two smoke grenades onto the floor. He dived behind the couch as Oz fired at him. Steele caught the string on the blind and the room went dark. Gunfire erupted and another thug was shot accidentally. Steele put on his night vision sunglasses from his earlier visit to Vansome’s house. He whirled around and stared down the barrel of Oz’s gun. Steele blinked and realized there was no gunfire, Oz couldn’t see him and doesn’t realize he had Steele point blank. Steele grabbed Oz’s gun and fired at two other goons. They went down as Oz twisted the gun away and fired wildly in the darkness at Steele. A bullet whizzed by and grazed Steele in his leg.

“Arrg,” Steele moaned. Oz stopped and aimed at Steele voice. Steele pushed one of the thugs at Oz who emptied his pistol into him. Steele hit Oz in the chest and the two of them slammed through the door and into the hallway.

In the adjoining glass boardroom, seven executives sat listening to a young woman giving a presentation for Sembrodi camping supplies. On the boardroom table was a number of pots, pans, knives, ropes and other camping merchandise. The female executive was taping her laptop to flip the slide for a presentation on the screen. There was a bar

graph describing sales trends for the products. She continued with her sales analysis.

“You can see by this year’s sales that people are buying more of the hard product supplies, less tents and canoes but more survivalist gear like food packets, knives and rifles.”

“Isn’t that turning our brand into more violent accessories and alienating our target audience of families?” A nervous looking man with white sideburns interjected.

“Good question, our market research shows that our product’s image is still perfect for the family buyer and indicate few signs of it promoting violence.”

Crash!

Steele and Oz tumbled out of the office, smashed through the glass retainer and landed onto the boardroom table. Executives scattered, leaving the boardroom through the door and the broken window. Oz punched Steele in the jaw as he landed on top of him. Steele’s hand reached for something underneath his back, grabbed a pot and slammed Oz over the head with it. Oz fell off the table but reached for a tent pole and charged with it at Steele. The female presenter watched the whole scene, frozen into place. Steele grabbed a knife with a compass and grinned.

“Gotcha,” he yelled, brandishing the knife.

Oz smashed the knife with the tent pole, knocking the blade out of the handle of the knife and onto the floor. Steele stared at knife-less handle in disbelief.

“Cheap knife,” as he tossed it at Oz. The woman scribbled this note down vigorously on her clipboard.

Oz swung the tent pole, missing Steele’s feet as he jumped in the air off the boardroom table. He hit the ceiling and pushed two panels, knocking dust into Oz’s eyes. Steele saw the tent rope on the floor and reached for it. Oz smashed him in the back with the pole. Steele was face down on the table; Oz grabbed the rope and pulled it taunt around Steele’s neck, strangling him. Steele’s eyes bulged and his face turned red from the lack of oxygen. Before he passed out, he spied a tent peg. Just as Steele is about to pass out, he grasped the peg and he viciously

jabbed it down into Oz's foot. Oz screamed in agony and released the rope. Steele kicked him off the table into the corner, knocking the projector screen to the floor. Steele grabbed the rope and lashed it around Oz's midsection like roping a steer. As Steele tied the rope, Oz, punched him in the face and slammed him back onto the table. Steele kept a hold of the rope in his left hand.

Oz peered down at the rope tied around his chest.

"Oy! What the hell do you think you're trying to do mate, become a boy scout?" He stepped forward; Steele kicked Oz back against the wall. As Oz fell down, Steele threw one end of the rope over the ceiling beam exposed by the missing ceiling tiles. Oz jumped at Steele and knocked him down to the end of the table with Steele hanging off the edge of the table.

Oz pulled out his knife.

"Game over action hero. You lose," he plunged the knife down towards Steele's stomach. Steele fell back off the table, pulling the rope and Oz up in the air until his head slams into the metal rafter above. Oz was knocked out cold.

"I think the game just reached a new level," remarked Steele.

The woman came over to Steele, "Aren't you", she started. Steele realized that she recognized him

"I am," he gave a macho pose with his hand on his chin

"Wow you were fantastic. Is this some kind of movie?"

"Actually, this was a new ad campaign. The slogan is "we'll take you to a higher level," Steele replied as Oz swung in the air. He tied the rope off on the doorknob to keep Oz airborne. "But leave him where he is." Steele pointed to Oz as he passed by her to leave the room.

"You're some much more likeable than the papers describe you," she remarked as they exited the demolished door. She watched him returned to the main office. A co-worker rushed into the boardroom and exclaimed at the mess.

"What the hell happened in here?" he scanned around the boardroom and saw Oz's unconscious body hanging from the ceiling.

"What's up with him?"

"I don't think he liked this year's products," she replied.

Meanwhile in the office interior during Steele and Oz's fight in the boardroom, smoke dissipated from the grenade and spewed into the hallway. Wolfe made out the outline of the desk and spied the papers. His hand reached for them. A knife comes down and cutting one his fingers.

"Nobody touches my business. Nobody!"

Wolfe looked into the cold hard eyes of Julia Sembrodi and screamed.

"Ahhh!! That's my pinky you stabbed!"

He punched her in the jaw with his other arm knocking her out against her chair. She collapsed to the floor. One of the thugs behind him tried to stand, shaking his head to regain his senses. Before he got up, Wolfe kicked him in the stomach, knocking him out.

"Give me your tie," he pulled the tie of the unconscious man and wraps it around his bleeding finger.

"I hate suits!" he yelled to a room of bodies lying on the floor. "I never got hurt like this in the movies!" he looked down at his bloodied hand. He grabbed the papers and put them into his duffle bag while marching out the door. He watched Steele leaving the boardroom.

"Hey, you're still alive, I've got the papers."

"Good job, what the hell happened to your hand?" Steele pointed to Wolfe's bloody tie while Steele limped down the hallway.

"I got stabbed. Why are you limping?" asked Wolfe.

"I got shot. Let's get out of here before our host sends reinforcements."

They headed to the banks of elevators, which were now working, and the alarm was no longer blaring. Wolfe pressed the elevator door button. The doors opened and five guns pointed into his face as security has came up from the lobby.

"Oh shit," said Steele.

Wolfe stared at the tallest of the security guards who easily dwarfed his height. He sighed with relief.

"Thank god, your guys are here. There's a shootout going on in the main office. You had better get in there before someone gets hurt."

The guards ran forward as the big security guard radioed downstairs.

“Possible guns fired on top floor, will investigate.” Four of the five guards had left but the largest one remains behind.

“Great work, we have to check on some more fire alarms,” smiled Wolfe.

They stepped into the elevator and the door was about to close when the security guard noticed a gun sticking out of Wolfe’s duffle bag. The guard drew his gun as the doors were closing. The guard radioed back to the others.

“I have visual of the gunmen! Need assistance at elevator doors now!” His arm stopped the doors from closing. Steele hit the security guard’s arm knocking his gun to the floor. The elevator doors opened; the other guards were racing down the hallway with guns drawn. Wolfe pulled the security guard into the elevator and against the wall as Steele closed the door. Bullets drilled into the outside door.

“Good friends you have, they could have shot you,” Steele said to the guard as he smashed him in the jaw. The guard fell backwards and then dove for the gun. Wolfe kicked it back to Steele as the guard hit Wolfe against the elevator door.

“Can this elevator go any slower?” moaned Wolfe. Steele grabbed the gun and pointed it at the guard. Wolfe screamed as he was fighting off the security guard.

“Don’t shoot him, he’s just doing his job. Besides it will probably ricochet off the walls and kill us.” Steele put the gun in his pants and as Wolfe jumped onto the shoulders of the guard. The guard stood up smashing Wolfe’s head on the ceiling

"Owww"

“Steele, hit him!” Steele punched him in the chest while Wolfe pounded him in the head.

The elevator doors opened onto the main lobby floor. The elevator was empty as security guards rushed by to another bank of elevators.

“We’re shutting down all elevators ASAP, no one is coming up or down without your approval,” the guard yelled into his walkie talkie as his voice got fainter. Wolfe’s head peeked out from the right wall of the elevator. Steele’s head looked out from the left. They brushed off debris from their clothes and removed their fire jackets. As they walked out, the security guard’s body slumped down into view. Embarrassed,

they backed up; Wolfe pushed the unconscious body back into the corner while Steele pressed the close button for the elevator doors. They walked towards the main entrance.

“Once were though those lobby doors, we’re safe.”

“If nothing else goes wrong today,” said Steele.

“Always the pessimistic. Follow me, we’re on the home stretch.”

“As soon as we get out of here, let’s get some medical attention.”

“Two hundred more feet and we’re out here.”

“What if the guys upstairs have radioed down our description?”

“Oh shit!”

“What?” asked Steele as they rounded the corner. In front of them was a logjam of people waiting to go through the metal detector. “Crap, we don’t have time for this.”

“Give me a moment to think,” pleaded Wolfe.

Outside the building, Vansome walked with Crash and Burn in tow climbing the main staircase to Sembrodi Industries.

“What the hell is going on here?” asked Vansome as he watched people fleeing the building and saw a fire truck parked on the street.

“Looks like a fire, Blaze.”

“Really, thanks for explaining that to me,” Blaze barked sarcastically. “Julia demanded I come down to discuss business with her and the whole company is burning to the ground,”

“She sounded angry on the phone. Is there a problem?” wondered Crash.

Vansome slapped Crash in the side of the head.

“You worry too much,” he looked at Burn. “Both of you. I’ll take care of Sembrodi. You two make sure nothing happens to me.” A person knocked Vansome to the ground. “Watch where you’re going,” Vansome sneered as the business suit keeps running. “Why aren’t you watching what’s going on,” he yelled at the two bodyguards as he picked himself up. “Idiot!” Blaze brushed the dirt off of his suit,” can this day get any worse?”

Blam! Gunfire erupted in the main lobby. The crowd panicked while many dove down to the floor for protection.

“Stop those two men!” The big security guard yelled from the elevator doors. He stumbled and advanced towards Wolfe and Steele. The crowd dispersed leaving them out in the open.

“That gets rid of our crowd problem. Any ideas on how to find a new exit?” asked Steele. The other security guards were pushing through the crowd to capture them.

“Just one,” added Wolfe. He pulled a clump of plastic explosive from his pouch, clipped the engage button and threw it so it stuck to a huge plexiglas window.

“Bomb! Everyone down!” Wolfe yelled to all those around him.

The chaos increased in intensity as people ran away from them. One security guard drew his gun and aimed at Steele. Wolfe punched in the remote.

Boom! The concussive force shattered the plexiglas sending hard glass chunks onto the granite floor. Outside, people were rocked off their feet in surprise including Vansome and his bodyguards. Steele and Wolfe gathered their wits seconds after the blast.

“Let’s go!”

They dashed out of the broken window into the courtyard. They ran over Vansome who was still picking himself up from the blast. He watched Steele and Wolfe running away. Blaze slapped Burn who was still in a prone position on the concrete.

“Get up! Wolfe and Steele just ran by! I’m sure those two have something to with this mess. Get them!”

Both bodyguards chased after Steele and Wolfe as they reached the street. Traffic was congested with commuters and the action stars had to weave in and out of cars honking at their approach.

“Want to drive your car out of here?” inquired Wolfe.

“No time, we’ll never get out of this traffic. Besides after what we did to your convertible, I’ll leave my car.”

“How are we going to get out of here?”

Steele saw a tour bus taking the fast lane on the street. A huge banner was strapped from end to end on the upper deck with the words ‘Star Tour’s’ written in huge letters.

“Grab the bus!”

They ran at full speed to catch up. Wolfe grabbed the handle to the double decker with Steele in pursuit. The bus sped up to beat the lights.

“Come on, reach for my hand!” yelled Wolfe. Wolfe extended with his arm out to Steele. Immediately in front of him, a taxi car stopped and opened his driver’s door.

“Oh shit!” yelled Steele.

He kept his forward momentum by jumping onto the trunk of the cab and avoiding the door. He ran over the roof onto the hood and back onto the street without losing too much distance from the bus.

“Hey,” yelled the taxi driver.

“Was that a movie star?” asked the female fare to her husband.

Steele was almost out of breath when Wolfe extended Pang’s training rope for him to grab. He clips the carbineer end to a loop on the bus grab bar.

“Take the rope, I’ll pull you in.”

Steele grabbed the rope and was dragged by the bus with Wolfe reeling him in. A car swerved into the lane and Steele pushed off of the ground and jumped into the air. The momentum pulled Steele over the roof of the compact car, narrowly misses colliding with it. Wolfe tugged the rope closer and Steele grabbed the handle reaching the outside lift of the bus.

“I hate taking the bus,” yelled Steele.

“I don’t. It gives me time to think. And I’m thinking how the hell did Sembrodi know we were coming?”

“We only told two people, Hamesh and Pang. Could it be one of them?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”

“Relax, you made it, we’re free and clear. Nobody can catch us now.”

The bus slowed down and stopped. The tour guide in the bus spoke thru a megaphone and addressed the bus occupants.

“On our right is the famous Shrine Auditorium, known for countless Oscar ceremonies and other star-studded occasions.” Steele pushed through the doorway, much to the surprise of the driver and tour guide.

“Drive now!” he yelled at the driver. The crowd murmured.

“Aren’t they action stars Steele Tyler and Wolfe Neilson?”

“I heard they were on the last tour!”

“Where’s my camera?”

“Can you get their autograph?”

The tour guide was overwhelmed by this unexpected interruption.

“Excuse me, we are on a strict schedule. This is a five-minute stop. No exceptions.”

Wolfe grabbed the tour guide and pointed at the window.

“See those three men?” Vansome was running through traffic with Crash and Burn trailing behind. “They’re going to ruin your tour. Drive now and Steele and I will gladly sign autographs for these tourists.” She peered outside and back to the driver. She nodded to him to continue driving.

“We will move on from the Shrine to downtown LA and the shopping district of the Alleys,” she used the megaphone again to explain the change in venues. The bus pulled away with Vansome jumping onto the front landing. Crash and Burn grabbed onto the second entrance doors just as the bus picked up speed.

Vansome ripped open the bus doors and kicked Wolfe in the chest and knocking him into the driver. The chain reaction resulted in the bus veering into the wrong lane before the driver corrected himself. The two big wrestlers pried open their door. Steele and Wolfe climbed the stairs to the second level of the double-decker bus.

“Is this a movie?” asked one of the tourists to the tour guide.

Cameras flashed, blinding Wolfe and Steele momentarily.

“Our endearing public,” Wolfe said to Steele.

The top level of the double-decker was half full. The two bodyguards chased them up the stairs. Wolfe went down on all fours.

“Hit them hard,” he yelled at Steele.

Steele looked at Wolfe on the floor and took a running charge. He springboarded off Wolfe’s back and used the momentum to hit Burn squarely in the chest. Burn stumbled backward into Crash causing the two to tumble down the stairs back to the first level. Wolfe jumped up and slapped Steele’s hand.

“You got game brother!” Wolfe thanked as he headed to the back of the bus.

“Thanks for the help. How are we going to get out of here?” Steele asked.

At that moment, Wolfe was hit from behind and fell onto the corridor between the seats. All the tourists trained their cameras to the back of the bus.

“Get up old man, we have some unfinished business,” taunted Vansome. He had climbed up the set of stairs in the back of the bus for the ambush.

“I think he’s talking to you,” Steele poked Wolfe in the arm, “I’ll take care of the twins.”

Steele leapt down the stairs. Wolfe turned to face Vansome.

“Your girlfriend’s gone now Wolfe; sure you want to party?” Vansome teased.

“Trust me, you’re the one guy I definitely don’t want to party with.” Wolfe punched Vansome back into an empty seat. “But if this party involves me beating the shit out of you, I’m all for it!” The last thing Vansome saw was a kick coming at his face.

Downstairs, Steele was boxed in. He was caught between a rock and hard place as Crash and Burn used their size advantage and lack of space to corner Steele near the door entranceway. The driver gave a concerned look at Steele as he backed up.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you that playing two on one isn’t fair?” Steele stared at the identical twins. “Course I’m assuming you both have the same mother,” he added wryly. Burn charged in anger while Steele kicked him in the chest. Burn fell backward onto an old lady in a flowery dress.

“Sorry,” consoled Steele.

The woman clubbed Burn with her purse.

“You brute!”

Burn stood up and tried to intimidate the old woman. Instead he earned himself another shot in the head with her purse. He reached to stop her and was slugged by a younger man with his knapsack.

“Leave her alone bully!”

Another tourist hit Burn until the group of angry tourists overwhelmed him. Steele watched the brutal fighting going on between the wrestler and the tourists.

“That evens up the odds,” he proclaimed. Unfortunately, as he turned his head, he took a punch in the jaw from Crash and went

sprawling into the street. Steele reached for the door hand bar at the last second before being thrown into traffic.

“Blaze says you got to go,” Crash lunged at Steele and used the bus momentum to punch Steele in the stomach.

“You do everything that Vansome tells you? I think he told you to jump off a bus!”

Steele grabbed Crash to push him off his feet. Crash held his ground and used his superior weight to push Steele down on the bus landing; Steele’s head was inches from the street. Crash shoved his face so close that Steele could smell the tar on the road. Crash raised his fist to deliver the final blow.

“I think this is your stop” as he stood to knock Steele off. Suddenly his fist froze, and his eyes opened wide in pain. Behind him stood the tour guide after she has delivered a kick to his groin. She looked at Steele

“He was ruining the tour,” she said.

Steele grabbed the hunched over Crash and tossed him from the steps onto the rooftop of a convertible. The canopy shredded as Crash’s body fell through the roof. He twisted and landed in the passenger seat. His head dropped between the legs of a woman. The car came to a screeching halt. A man with a balding forehead leapt out of the driver seat of the car. He was furious about the damage to his car.

“You drug-crazed idiot! Do you know how hard it is to get decent insurance rates in this town? You better plan on paying for this out of your pocket because I don’t plan on making a claim.” He pushed Crash while he was still lying face down on the woman.

“Are you listening to me, do you know who I am?” the man bragged. “You’ve ruined my..... supper plans?” He faults on his last two words as Crash stood up and the man realized how massive he is.

“Your dinner plans are the least of your problems.” The last thing the man saw was Crash’s fist and then was greeted by the warm asphalt.

Seconds later the convertible spun its rear tires as it rejoined traffic minus its driver.

“Where are we going?” the woman asked with half fear and half excitement in her voice.

Crash stared at the street up ahead.

“We’re going to catch a bus!” as he watched the bus disappearing around a corner.

Vansome leapt out of the way of Wolfe’s sidekick.

“You telegraphed that kick. It was so slow I saw it coming yesterday.” He flipped a spinning back kick and hit Wolfe squarely in the chest knocking him into the lap of an attractive blond tourist.

“Sorry miss,” said Wolfe as he looked her over.

“Honey, you can fall into my lap anytime,” she responded with a southern drawl. Wolfe stepped towards the front of the bus while Vansome ran at him. A leg from the pretty blond inadvertently got in the way and Vansome tumbled fright into Wolfe’s fist. Vansome went flying back to the end of the aisle.

“That’s two I owe you,” said Wolfe looking at the southern belle.

“Don’t worry sugar, I’m sure you’ll think of a way to return the favour,” she sweetly replied.

Downstairs on the first level, Steele grappled with Burn, trading punches back and forth. Several tourists continued to interfere, hitting Burn from a variety of angles. Steele yelled to the driver

“Open the side doors!”

The door folded open and the driver turned a hard left. Steele kicked Burn out the door into a pile of garbage cans along an alleyway. Steele waved as Burn slammed a garbage can to the ground in anger. Everyone in the bus applauded and arms everywhere patted Steele on the back. The old lady approached Steele.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Just taking out the trash!”

She patted him sweetly on the head, “Boys will be boys.”

Upstairs, Wolfe was kicked to the gut and tumbled into an empty seat on the driver’s side of the bus. Vansome moved in for the kill.

“Old man you’re finished, for good.” He kicked Wolfe off the seat and flying over the edge of the bus. The tourists gasped as Wolfe fell to the street below. Vansome bragged to the tourists.

“Ladies and gentlemen, that is how a real action star deals with his opponents.” He leaned over the edge of the bus down on the street. He

was slammed backwards by a punch in the nose. Wolfe was hanging on the rope of the 'Star Tours' banner that went from end to end of the bus. He looked up at Blaze.

"Important rule in action movies, Vansome. Never count your man out!" Wolfe hit him with another punch while trying to hold on. Vansome spit out blood onto the seat.

"You're done Wolfe. You just don't know it yet." He punched Wolfe who fell back and almost hit the side of a passing light pole. Vansome stepped onto the seat and leaned his body over the edge of the bus. He opened a switchblade and used the blade to cut the banner rope.

"Goodbye old man, give my regards to the street!"

Wolfe fell further down the rope and the side of the bus. He can't reach Blaze. The rope became frayed and Wolfe hugged the side of the bus for dear life. He saw another light pole and narrowly avoids it. Vansome wasn't as lucky. The curved light assembly hit him while he was leaning over the edge, knocking him down to the street below.

Vansome fell expecting the hard surface of the sidewalk. He closed his eyes and landed on a pile of boxes, which cushions his fall. He looked up and saw a beautiful woman staring down on him. She seemed familiar. Vansome relaxed.

"Maybe things have taken a turn for the better," he thought. He pushed himself up from the cardboard to charm the woman and came face to face with Wolfe.

"How did you get here?" Blaze yelled and punched Wolfe in the stomach, Wolfe fell flat to the ground. Blaze walked over and stepped on the cardboard cutout of Wolfe Neilson. Blaze realized his surroundings including all the tourists who are looking at him with great curiosity. He saw a multitude of famous celebrity cardboard cutouts. He had fallen into a photo booth where tourists pose with faded stand-ups of their favourite movie star. The merchant ran up to Blaze.

"You're going to have to pay for these," the merchant whined to Blaze.

"Is he someone famous?" a young boy said to his mother not recognizing Blaze's celebrity status. Blaze ripped the head off Wolfe's cardboard stand up much to the merchant's horror.

"I hate this town!" Blaze screamed and threw the cardboard head of Wolfe onto the sidewalk.

Back on the bus, Steele rejoined Wolfe on the upper deck. People were cheering and milling around the two of them.

“We did it! You got the papers!” Steele tapped the duffle pack. “What do we do next?” he questioned Wolfe.

“We should sign a few autographs,” Wolfe wrote on a piece of paper as the tourists passed them brochures to sign. And I would like to thank a few people,” he looked over at the young southern girl who blew him a kiss.

“You’d pick up girls in a funeral home,” Steele exclaimed.

“For now, there is only one woman who I trust to solve our problem.”

Her office was quiet except for the sound of a television in the background. The woman was typing away on her laptop. The phone rang and she reached over to pick it up.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Toni, is that you. It’s Wolfe!”

Toni bolted straight up out of her chair.

“Wolfe, where the hell are you? You had me worried sick. Do you know that the police called? They dragged your car out of the San Pedro pier yesterday. Is Steele okay? Where have you been?”

“Whoa, one question at a time. Steele’s here with me. We’re okay. But we need your help.”

“Anything! Where have you been? Where did you go after your meeting with Tassel?”

“We talked to him and he was being leaned on by the mafia and our old pal Blaze Vansome.”

“What? Mafia? Blaze Vansome? Listen Wolfe, I don’t like him anymore than you, but he doesn’t have the power to shut down our movie.”

“Well, his silent partner does, and she wants to silence us For good.”

“Stop talking like you’re in one of your action movies. Go see the cops. They’ll investigate her and get you off the hook.”

“No way Toni. We have proof that will put this mafia don away. This is LA and you know how evidence has a way of disappearing in this town.”

“Okay. I know some people we can trust. Meet me at the movie set in one hour. Bring your proof and we’ll take it to my friends. Got it?”

“You’re the best, Toni,” Wolfe blew her a kiss goodbye.

Steele hit him on the shoulder to hand him the phone.

“Toni, don’t hang up. It’s Steele.”

“Remind me to never team the two of you up again.”

“Toni, big favour. Have you been talking to Pang lately?”

“Earlier today, why?”

“How well do you know him Toni?”

“Not very, but he comes highly recommended.”

“Listen, something happened today. We were tipped off to this crazy mafia woman and he was one of two people who knew where we went. Do us a favour and don’t have any conversations with him until this is over.”

“Done, oh Steele make sure you don’t get into anymore trouble before you see me.”

“Have I ever let you down?”

“You don’t want me to answer that question. Goodbye Steele.”
Steele turned the phone off.

“Well, we’ve got an hour to kill, what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know about you, but I need a drink.”

“Hey, I thought you quit?”

“I have, but trying times require a little strength. Trust me, Popeye needs his spinach. Just one little drink.”

“I’m watching you Wolfe, one drink and you’re off this picture,”
Steele teased.

“Watch it Steele, I’d almost got the impression that you’re looking after me.”

Toni changed quickly into a pair jeans and t-shirt. She ran down to her parking garage and jumped into her Lexus. The engine sprang to life on its first try. She blew by the parking attendant. Across the street, a black car turned on its lights watching Toni drive down the street. The driver’s head was in profile; a bald head. Pang dialed a cell phone

“She’s on the move, I’ll let you know shortly where to meet.”

Meanwhile in Hollywood, Crash steered the stolen car, with Burn in the back. They stopped at the photo stand to pick up Vansome as a passenger. Blaze looked at the woman in the front seat.

“Why is she here?”

“She came with the car,” explained Crash.

“Get rid of her!” he barked back. She turned to Crash and got out of the car in a huff.

“Will you call me?” she wailed.

“You bet,” Crash replied and pulled the car out into the street. She chased after the car.

“But you don’t even know my name!”

“That’s all right. He’ll look you up in the phone book under ugly untalented actresses,” snarled Blaze as they drove off.

In the backseat, Burn was preoccupied with wiping garbage off his clothes.

“You stink,” Vansome sneered.

“Sorry boss. I got thrown into some garbage cans. I’m still picking it out of my clothes.”

“Let’s get home so you can get cleaned up and I’ll dump this car before it gets reported stolen,” said Crash. Just then, Vansome’s phone rang.

“What do you want?” Blaze paused to hear the voice on the other line. “Oh sorry, its you. They are? Where? No, we’ll be there to help you finish it.” He finished the call.

“What did she say,” asked Crash. Blaze’s eyes were filled with rage.

“Turn this car around now! We got one more chance to end this once and for all.”

Chapter 13

The Hunted

Extreme Men of Action movie set

8pm

Security let Wolfe and Steele onto the lot. The movies set was deserted, no one but themselves is around. They drove around the sound stage and parked by a door.

“What you think, Wolfe? We are having a clandestine meeting with our producer to get rid of the bad guys. Reminds me of one of our movies don’t you think?”

“Steele, trust me no one could write something this convoluted.”

“I guess you’re right, who’d believe this crazy plot.”

They entered the door into the staging area between the jungle exteriors and fortress sets.

“Yo Toni, you here?” Echoes bounced off the walls followed by silence.

“She’s not here yet.” Wolfe pointed at the set. “Everything is still here from our jungle attack scene. They even left out the machine gun for the big explosive finale.” He picked it up and aimed it at Steele.

“Money or your life, Steele?”

“Put it down before I shove it down your throat!” Wolfe ran over to a switchboard with a detonator push down box. He motioned that he’s going to push the lever”

“Threaten me again Steele and I’ll blow us to Kingdom Come!”

“Can’t you guys ever be serious?” yelled Toni from the dressing room area.

“Finally, someone who is sane.” He was still looking at the pointed barrel of Wolfe’s gun.

“Stop pointing that at me, it could go off,” Steele pushed the barrel from his chest.

“Relax it just shoots paintballs. It won’t sting you anymore than last time.”

“Guys, you called me so I could take this ‘proof’ to the cops. Where is it?” Toni held out her hand. Wolfe passed her the documents and she leafed through the pages.

“In there,” Wolfe pointed to the sheets, “are the dirty tactics they were using on Tassel to get him off the movie by threatening his kids.”

“There’s some other stuff between Sembrodi and Vansome that looks far from legal. The courts will have a field day with those documents,” Steele added.

“Has he seen any of these yet?” Toni questioned.

“No, you are the only one we have shown thus far.”

Toni’s phone rang.

“We’re good” she hung up.

“Who was that?”

“Your support. Let’s take these documents to where they belong.”

The west door opened, and a car's headlights obscured the people walking in. Toni stepped away. Julia Sembrodi entered with Oz and three other suits. From the dressing room, Vansome burst in with Crash and Burn.

“What the hell!” Wolfe and Steele backed up. Steele stepped sideways to the mafia group while Wolfe faced Vansome’s crew.

“Toni, these are the people that have been after us. What’s the hell’s going on?” Wolfe asked.

“Don’t be so thick Wolfe, Toni sold us out! The only question is why?” Steele spit. Toni moved forward and slapped Steele in the face.

“Enough of your drama Steele!” she threatened. “For too long I’ve held your hand and nursed your ego when I wanted to reach across the table and strangle your neck. You don’t get it, either of you. The movie business is about making money! Neither one of you have done that in long time. Insurance on the default of your movie is worth ten times whatever bomb you’ll finish.” She looked at Julia and pointed back at Steele and Wolfe, “they’re unarmed.”

“You’ve been in partnership with Vansome since the beginning?” Wolfe realized how obvious the question was. Blaze came forward.

“What was your first clue? You guys are has-beens, you’re yesterday’s heroes. No one wants to see you anymore. Toni was smart enough to back the right actor for her investment.”

“Money, is that the only thing that matters to you Blaze? Do you ever enjoy what you do? Have you ever appreciated the look on a kid’s face when he brightens up because he thinks you’re cool? I have

screwed up a lot of things during my career but I sure as hell didn't forget why I got into this business. You're on the other hand are pathetic, and so are you Toni for selling us out," Wolfe scorned.

"I don't understand something," Steele butted in. "We didn't tell you," he pointed at Toni, "about our stunt at Sembrodi Enterprises. Is Pang involved with you as well?"

"Pang is an old fool. I had him promise to call me on your activities if you showed up to see him. He told me what was going on and I phoned Julia before you landed up at her office," Toni answered. Wolfe pounded his fist into a fake set wall.

"Damn it, and here we were blaming him for our set-up!"

"Gentlemen," Julia finally spoke, "This was strictly a business deal until you involved yourself. You assaulted me at my restaurant and again at my company. In business, you either buy out or remove any annoyances." Oz pulled out a gas can from outside the doorway. "You're not worth my money."

"We didn't even get to negotiate?" asked Wolfe.

"You are about die on your own movie set in a tragic fire. I'm sure the two of you will get a heartfelt news article tomorrow and then be soon forgotten within a few days. Mind you, we will remember you from the insurance claim that Toni will collect." Julia looked to the right. "Oz!" Oz unholstered his weapon.

"Sorry blokes, no happy ending today." He pointed his gun at their heads as they raise their hands.

"Any ideas," Steele motioned to Wolfe.

"Fresh out, been good working with you."

Vansome faked some tears. "How touching," he turned to Oz. "Can we get this over with, I have a brunch date in the morning."

Out of nowhere, the main spotlight switched on from the control room overlooking the sound stage. Standing in front of the booth was Pang and Madison Jones.

"Is this a private party or can anyone join?" Madison cocked her head at Julia. Vansome panicked.

"Who told these two about the meeting? Did you sell us out Toni?" Vansome grabbed Toni and pushed her towards Crash and Burn.

“Don’t pass the blame Blaze especially since you wanted to have some insurance against your partner,” Madison yelled down to Julia. Vansome stiffened and turned to Julia.

“I have no idea what that bimbo is talking about. She’s trying to work us against each other.”

“For your sake, this had better be true or a lot more bodies will be found in this fire.” She ran her sharp nails up Vansome’s chest. “Take care of all four of them,” she motioned to Oz and his thugs.

“We now join our feature presentation.” Pang clicked his fingers and the spotlights shut off with all other stage lights plunging the set into total darkness. Gunfire illuminated the darkness where Wolfe and Steele were standing.

“Enough. Stop before you shoot one of us,” Julia screamed. Moments later the backup lights came on giving red illumination to the set, but it was still hard to see more than few feet. Julia barked out more orders.

“You,” she pointed at one of the thugs, “Guard the doors. No one leaves unless I send their corpses out. The rest of you spread out and bring them back without a pulse.” Oz left with two of his men towards the sets.

“Don’t just stand there, Vansome!” Julia yelled. “You’re either part of the solution or you’re very dead. Find them!”

Blaze grimaced. “We’ll bring them back, but I better not get a bullet in my back for my troubles.”

Julia gave him a menacing stare, “have I ever broken one of our deals? Now find them!”

Blaze and his two bodyguards searched around the sound stage.

The mafia thugs searched the jungle set interior. The main booth played out the sounds of crickets and insects through the speakers. Water dripped down the fake foliage; the heat in the building further reinforced the atmosphere of the jungle. Two of the thugs walked along the path with their guns drawn. One of them stepped tentatively ahead while the other stopped as if he heard a sound.

A body stretched down from an above tree branch. The thug turned to face his attacker. Before he could even register alarm, he was disarmed with two fists come on both sides of his head, knocking him out cold. His body fell and was eaten up by the jungle moss disappearing into the dark. The whole attack occurred silently and took only seconds to happen.

The second thug turned around and was greeted by the disappearance of his partner.

“Gino, where are you?” he whispered. He moved forward as a trap floor opened and he teetered on the edge almost falling in. He regained his balance.

“I’m getting out of here!” he turned back into the incoming fist of Steele. The collision sent him falling into the darkness of the pit. The trapdoor covered itself as if nothing had occurred. Steele disappeared in a dry ice mist. Seconds later Crash and Burn walked onto the path.

“Why are we going down here? Didn’t the mafia suits already head this way?”

“I don’t know, Blaze said to get out and look so that’s what I’m doing,” answered Burn.

“Less talking, before you give us away. Only communicate with hand signals,” Crash showed him a fist to keep quiet. Burn flipped him the bird.

Throughout the set, an artificial river ran through the rock formation. Burn heard a splash coming from the river and motioned Crash that he was going to investigate. He stared into the still bubbling water; a goldfish swims by. Burn relaxed.

Splooosh!!!! Wolfe leapt out of the water and emptied his machine gun into Burn’s chest. Red globs gushed down Burn’s body. Burn slumped to the ground and his eyes welled up with tears. Wolfe disappeared into the water as Crash emptied his magazine unsuccessful at the water’s surface.

“Speak to me! Are you okay?” Crash cradled Burn’s head in his chest. Red oozed and dripped down from his mouth. Across from them lay a pyrotechnics switchbox for setting off effects on the set.

“They got me, promise to remember me through all the good and bad times we’ve had together. Promise me that you’ll tell Blaze that I gave it my all. Promise me you make them pay brother!”

“They will pay in blood brother,” they embraced. “I’ll never forget you.” Burn licked the blood from the wounds on his chest. Suddenly he made a funny face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Crash.

“I just never thought that my blood would taste like vegetable oil.”

Steele appeared behind Burn and Crash.

“Maybe you weren’t shot, yet.” He hit Crash with the butt end of a paintball gun knocking him out. Steele pushed Crash’s unconscious body into a crevasse and the foliage immediately covers up his body. Steele followed Crash into the bushes to tie him up.

Burn rose to attack but was dragged down by Wolfe who pulled him into the murky water, and they disappeared into the current. Moments later Blaze ran into the dark set.

“Burn, Crash, are you here? I heard yells. Where are you? Speak to me now, I demand it!” He pulled out a nasty looking gun.

“Fine, if you want something done. You got to do it yourself.”

He stepped towards the water but whirled around to a sound behind him. A soaked Wolfe kicked the gun out of his hand, and it vanished into the bushes. Blaze took off his jacket to reveal muscles under a white tank top. He stepped over the special effect’s detonator.

“Time to finish you old man, once and for all.”

Wolfe signaled him with his hand to advance. “Don’t sing it, just bring it!”

In the adjoining fortress set, Oz was approaching the first landing. He stopped. He heard the sound of metal on metal but couldn’t place the direction it was coming from. He searched around and a shadow grew from above. By the time Oz looked up, Steele flew in his cable harness with extra momentum to smash Oz into the wall. Oz punched back and grabbed Steele’s throat.

“Hey, I thought Aussies were friendly guys who hunted crocodiles. What happened to you?” Steele choked. He clamped down on Oz’s throat as well to block his airway.

“I found something else to hunt, mate.” With that he headbutted Steele knocking him backwards. Oz pulled out a boomerang.

“What are you going to do, club me to death?” Steele joked. Oz pressed a button on the top of the boomerang and a serrated knife-edge comes out along the length of both sides.

“No mate, death makes me more creative than that!”

Wolfe landed on his butt in the jungle grass as Blaze advanced.

“You just don’t get it, do you? Times passed you by. You can’t beat me now.” He smashed Wolfe again with a kick to the chest. “You couldn’t beat me in your prime,” he delivered another vicious chop to Wolfe’s head. “You will never beat me.”

Blaze stood triumphantly over Wolfe’s fallen body. Wolfe moved slowly as if defeated. Vansome enjoyed his victory too long and fell to the ground instead. Wolfe moved with quicker speed than expected and hit Blaze with a well-placed kidney punch.

“I may not be in my prime so instead of being young and stupid, I’m older and more treacherous,” he kicked Blaze in the back, sailing through the air. Wolfe ran over to Blaze.

” You may be faster, but I’ve been in more movie situations than you could ever dream of.” Wolfe sidekicked Blaze’s head causing him to fall down again. Wolfe stood over him and took a kick to the groin that caused him to double over.

“You want to school me on playing dirty. That’s a laugh. I’m the dirtiest player in the game. I’ve gotten everything in life,” he cradled Wolfe’s chin in his hand, “by lying, cheating and stealing,” and he smashed Wolfe to the ground. Blaze grabbed his gun that was knocked out of his hand and aimed it directly at Wolfe. “This ends now!”

Wolfe kicked his right foot, causing Blaze to misfire the gun. Blaze stumbled back, landing on the detonator’s box. Wolfe jumped into the bushes.

“Oh shit!” yelled Blaze. He attempted to stand as the explosive fireworks surged underneath igniting his hair. He tried to beat the flames out. He ran towards the water and jumped in headfirst. A moment later he splashed out of the water, screaming and turned his head into Wolfe’s first. Blaze was knocked unconscious and floated on top of the water.

“What a hot head,” Wolfe smirked.

Steele leapt backwards as Oz swiped him with the blade of the boomerang. Steele was gouged on his chest.

“Ow, that hurts,” yelled Steele

“That is only the beginning,” taunted Oz. He threw the boomerang as he lunged at Steele.

“Must be tough to catch,” Steele replied as the two-edged weapon flew by. Steele caught Oz and twisted his body to avoid the return of the boomerang as it imbedded itself into the nearby wall. Steele and Oz are tangled in the cables connected to his suit. They struggled until they face each other; their arms are intertwined in a mess of cables. Neither one could reach the other.

“Guess your boomerang’s out of range now mate,” Steele provided a bad Aussie accent.

“I don’t need a blade against a Hollywood lightweight!” Oz showed his teeth, “I’m going to bite your face off.” He moved closer like a vampire.

“What are you Hannibal Lector?” Steele pulled back away from Oz’s teeth, causing the cable to recoil back slamming them both into the opposite wall. Both men were momentarily winded from the impact. Oz recovered first and worked one of his hands free. He grabbed the boomerang from the wall as Steele saw the metal platform above them. He pulled his weight down on the cable and jumped down to the pit on the set. Oz was dragged along for the ride but cuts one of the cables with the blade of the boomerang.

The cable was stretched to its maximum point and the recoil pulled the two of them upwards. Both bodies crashed into the metal platform above them. There was a puncture sound as red droplets of blood dripped down the cable to the floor. Their bodies were twisted and as their bodies spun right, Oz had a fierce grin on his face. Wolfe looked down at his chest and saw Oz’s hand holding the boomerang plunged into his own chest. Oz convulsed and became unconsciousness. Steele hung in the air strapped to the badly bleeding Oz.

“Mate, you should have stuck with crocodiles.”

At the main doorway, one Mafioso remains. As he guarded the entrance, Sembrodi tapped her foot slowly on the concrete floor anticipating Oz’s return.

“I don’t like the quiet,” she said. Suddenly a thumping sound of wood off concrete reverberated from the shadows and Pang limped in slowly hunched over with a cane. The goon drew his gun.

“Where do you think your going, old man?” Pang lifted his head slowly; in a whirlwind of motion he spun his body around and smashed the fingers of the man’s hand with his cane. The gun flew into the darkness. The goon screamed and ran at the small Asian man. Pang stood perfectly still and moved his body slightly at the last moment as the thug missed and slammed into the wall. As he tried to get up, he received four quick blows with the cane to the stomach, back, arm, and behind the knees. Finally, Pang issued a bleeding curdling scream as he delivered a final blow to the head. The thug crumpled to the floor. Pang composed himself and lightly bowed to Julia.

“I won’t make the same mistake as he did,” she said. She pulled out her gun, “Goodbye Grandpa.” The gun fired but the bullet flew into the ceiling as Madison Jones kicked Sembrodi’s hand from the other side.

“Come on, fight a real bitch!” Madison challenged. Julia snatched Madison’s hair and slammed her down to the concrete floor. Pang stepped forward but Madison stretched her arm out to stop him. She held up a long strand of hair that Julia had pulled out.

“This bitch is mine!” She gave a vicious kick to Julia’s midsection that knocked her into the set display behind her. Julia jumped up and punched Madison in the chin. Madison returned the favour with a back slap to Julia’s face.

“You little Hollywood harlot. I’ve squashed bugs bigger than you.” Julia yelled while working her jaw back and forth from the impact.

“You don’t scare me,” Madison faced Julia. “Behind your goons and lawyers, you’re just another twisted little crook.”

Julia smashed Madison in the stomach causing her to fall to the floor.

“I’m worth more than you could ever imagine, all in a man’s world,” Julia glared at Madison’s fallen form. Madison kicked Julia’s leg knocking her to the floor.

“You made the same mistakes that men do by stepping on people to reach the top.”

Madison advanced but Julia grabbed the gun knocked out the goon’s hand on the floor.

“Men, women, they all go down before me. Nothing personal,” she cocked the gun and aimed at Madison, “its only business.”

Smash! Steele's fist decked Julia from behind. Her body fell to the floor. Wolfe walked up beside him.

“Dam it that hurt, I hate hitting women.” Steele said to Wolfe.

Madison advances towards Steele and traced her hand down his arm.

“Thanks for saving my hide there, hero,” and she kissed him fully on the lips.

“Whoa,” Steele backed away, “are lesbians allowed to kiss a guy like that?”

“Lesbian? Steele you should now better not to believe everything you read in the tabloids. Mind you, I use it to my advantage. When it suits me.” Steele looked back at Wolfe who shrugged.

“There is still one loose end to tie up,” Steele said as Pang brought Toni in the center of the four of them.

“I do not appreciate people who lie to me,” Pang said to Toni. Steele looked into Toni's eyes.

“Why Toni? We've been together for years, why sell us out now? Do you know you're responsible for making us,” he pointed at Wolfe, “into a team?” Toni raised her dejected head.

“I've known both of you for a very long time, my relationship has always been the same. You're both takers and I always gave. Finally, I decided that I wanted to do the taking. I thought the two of you couldn't make it together. Who would have thought that oil and water would mix? The ultimate revenge would be to bankrupt the two hugest egos in the action film business.”

“That was your fatal mistake,” stated Pang.

“What?” replied Toni.

“Your downfall was partnering with even worst egos. When you deal with a devil, you're bound to get burned.”

“Let's take her to security and get the cops here,” Madison pulled Toni with her towards the door.

“I'm sorry Toni,” Steele realized that he is partly responsible for Toni's betrayal. Pang reached over to put his hand on Steele's shoulder.

“Life is about making choices. She made hers and you both must continue to make yours, each and every day.” He stepped backwards in front of Wolfe and Steele and bowed before them.

“The two of you work well together,” he followed Madison as she dragged Toni to the door.

“Hard to believe we didn’t trust him,” said Steele as his face looked sad. Wolfe slapped Steele on the back.

“We did it partner, don’t look so glum. The bad guys are all put away. We took care of everything.”

At that moment, the goon who had guarded the door sprung from the shadows. Both Wolfe and Steele turned around, Steele punched to the head, Wolfe to the chest. The goon crumbled like a house of cards back to the floor. They both turned to each other.

“I hear you Wolfe. But with Toni turning on us, it doesn’t feel like much of a happy ending.”

“Why didn’t you say so,” Wolfe raised his arm and snapped his fingers, “one happy ending coming up!”

Malibu Beach

Afternoon

Wolfe and Steele were lying on beach chairs relaxing in the afternoon sun. The hot rays beat down on them with hardly a tourist in sight. The two of them clinked drink glasses in celebration.

“Didn’t I tell you? We get a happy ending,” said Wolfe as he downed his drink.

“You were right,” Steele peered over his sunglasses to watch a beautiful female surfer come out of the water. Her wet suit was halfway zipped to reveal a shapely sculptured body. Wolfe followed Steele’s eyes to watch her arrival from the water.

“Life is good my friend, nothing’s going to ruin this day.” Wolfe leaned up to get a better look at the beautiful surfer. She smiled. Wolfe smiled back. She pulled an Uzi from behind her back.

“Duck!” Steele yelled and jumped on Wolfe, knocking him into the sand. Bullets sprayed up and demolished the deck chairs.

“Why are the gorgeous women always so deadly?” Steele commented as he raised his head up from the sand. The surfer approached; gun ready to deal death to both of them.

Suddenly her mouth opened, and she stopped moving. She fell to the beach face first with a knife sticking out of her back. Behind her the equally beautiful Madison stood with her arm extended from throwing the knife. She grinned at Steele and Wolfe. She was interrupted by gunfire as four jet skis advanced with machine gun fire raining down on the beach. She ran into the sand dunes for cover.

“Wolfe, do you have any fire power, because in a few seconds we going to be overrun.”

“I only carry one kind of heat in these shorts,” Wolfe pointed at his bathing suit while Steele shook his head.

“Maybe this is a moment you can use my assistance?”

They both turned to see Hamesh come out of hole in the sand. He extended two mean looking weapons from the dune.

“Your Indian gadget man is here to serve. These are specially tuned for your hand signatures, don’t let anyone pick them up by mistake or,” he made an explosive gesture with his hands and mouthed the word ‘boom’.

“Your timing is fantastic Hamesh,” as Steele grabbed his gun.

“Good luck, I’ll be around,” and he disappeared back into the sand.

Steele and Wolfe aimed at their adversaries as they landed on the beach. Wolfe ignited one jet ski with a shot to its gas tank. The second jet ski rider stopped on the beach and threw a grenade near them. They ran for higher ground. Steele leapt behind a sand dune and fired three rounds into the grenade-throwing gunman. The gunman’s body collapsed into the water creating future shark bait.

The other two gunmen cautiously advanced. Steele is shot in the arm and dropped his gun. The two heroes ran, charging towards an old surfer shed. One of the gunmen picked up Steele’s gun during the chase and admired its handcraft. He aimed the gun at Steele who had his back turned. The sight has Steele dead to rights and the gunman finger was on the trigger. A shrill sound ignited from the weapon. The gun did not recognize the hand holding it and exploded, blowing the gunman apart. Steele and Wolfe dashed behind the shed.

“I think that last explosion took out the last of them,” Steele gasped out of breath.

“Why don’t you look around the corner and see,” offered Wolfe.

“Me, you’re the one that still has the gun, why don’t you check?”

“Your constant bickering will be the end of both of you.” A man who looked remarkably similar to Oz appeared at the other end of the shed. His gun was pointed directly at their backs.

“Lose the gun Wolfe,” he commanded.

Wolfe tossed his weapon into the sand dune. The two of the them turn around to face their attacker.

“It doesn’t have to end like this, you can give up. We promise not to hurt you,” Steele said to his attacker.

The gunman laughed, “That’s rich mate. I’ve got the drop on you and your last words are to tell me to give up. You’re both pathetic. I will be doing the world a great service by killing both of you. Goodbye Men of Extreme Action.”

Blam! The door of the shed opened and smashed the attacker in the face. Pang stepped out into the beach dune in a calm, tranquil state. The attacker fell unconscious to the ground.

“And cut! That was fantastic. Pang. You are a natural. You should star in a movie of your own,” the director Sven stood up from his director’s chair and motioned to the movie crew around them. “That’s a wrap people. The big finale party is for nine tonight, make sure you can make it.”

Wolfe lifted up the Oz actor and shook his hand. People dispersed from the film crew to clean up from the beach shooting. Wolfe and Steel approached Pang.

“You were pretty good Pang. What made you decide to finally appear in our movie?”

Pang looked very thoughtful to the sky. He motioned to them to come closer as if to tell a great secret. Steele and Wolfe leaned their bodies in to listen to his words.

“The money.” He turned and walked off while Wolfe and Steele laughed. The two of them head to the beach.

“It’s a perfect day my friend, with all the press fanfare about our real-life exploits. The movie is a sure-fire box-office hit. This is a perfect ending for us,” Wolfe said to Steele. Steele appeared sad as he watched the ocean tide come in.

“What’s wrong buddy, we’re back on top,” asked Wolfe.

“This is a perfect ending but

James Kochanoff

“But what?”

“What are we going to do for a sequel?”

The End?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Kochanoff is currently in a four-book deal with Silver Leaf Books in Massachusetts. The series is a young adult dystopian fiction with the first novel “Drone World” exploring the life of a teenage girl who thinks she lives in a perfectly safe city patrolled by drones, until she tries to leave it.

He signed a contract with Toonz Animation, Asia’s largest animation for an animated pilot of his novel “Men of Extreme Action.” To see images from this pilot, please visit his website at www.adventurebooks.ca

It’s tough to make a career as an author. About 1% can truly make a living at it. If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on your favorite book retailers’ site and tell others about the book.