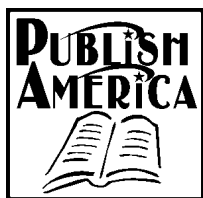


Men of Extreme Action

James Kochanoff



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Dedicated to action movie stars and their
memorable one-liners.

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Chapter One

It was a good morning to kill a man.

The rising Mexican sun glitters over the wet jungle landscape. A young Spanish man with a dirty beard wears army fatigues and carries his automatic rifle over his shoulder as he crosses a wooden log bridge. He yawns, obviously near the end of his shift. He looks to his right as if anticipating the arrival of someone, when no one comes, he pulls out a homemade smoke and lights up. He takes a few drags and looks at his nicotine stained hands in boredom.

Crash! A flock of birds take off into flight from the trees, startling the soldier. He panics and points the rifle at the birds as they fly into the sun. His body tenses and he scans the trees for movement.

False Alarm, he thinks, as he sees nothing. He smiles. This assignment was the easiest money he had ever made, hardly anyone ever comes up into these mountains. He looks 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 looks at his feet and sees another shadow appear.

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

As he turns, his smile becomes a grimace of pain and fear.

Another flock of birds fly shrieking from the jungle into the sky.

One mile away in a small soldiers’ camp, the early morning activity begins as soldiers wake up for their shift. A cook starts a fire with a small iron pan placed over the flames. The cook looks down into the greasy animal fat as it bubbles to a boil. Close to the campfire is a large barrack hut; inside a row of dirty beds line the edge of the wall. A soldier is shaving in front of a cracked mirror; he pulls the blade deliberately over his face, never missing a spot. He wipes the remaining shaving cream off his face with a towel and walks out in the main sleeping area. He kicks the bottom of the bunk beds with a bang.

“Luis, get up,” he yells with a Spanish accent. He buttons up a green army jacket over his tank top. He smiles and starts talking to the bed above him.

“The opium crop is good this year, no? We have made so much money; no one ever comes up into these mountains but a few hunters and some poor farmers. Hah, no one stands a chance against us.” The soldier beats his chest as he talks. He looks back to the unmoving bed. He frowns as a drop of liquid falls to the floor.

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

The soldier turns towards the door in anger and draws his weapon from his holster. A shadow falls upon his face. From the ceiling, an arm reaches down, cradling a knife and slices the soldier’s jugular. The soldier puts his hand to his throat to stop the bleeding and looks down at disbelief to the crimson warm liquid covering his hand. He falls to his knees and his sightless eyes fall face first onto the floor. The shadow drops from the ceiling to land noiseless to the floor. The assassin wipes his bloodied knife against the bedspread.

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

“Send the message in the usual manner,” the larger officer commands patting his large stomach as it growls for breakfast. He looks 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 salutes in attention and begins typing into the laptop.

The door to the cabin kicks open and the assassin leaps into the room. The officer fumbles in surprise for his weapon and swiftly receives a bullet to his brain. He crumples to the floor. The assassin looks at the fallen body.

“At ease,” he directs to the dead officer.

He looks back to the communication soldier who has huddled under his desk and is trembling.

“Where is the meeting place?” the assassin points an evil looking pistol at the centre of the small man’s forehead. The communications soldier looks confused and his eyes look downcast to the floor as if he doesn’t understand English. He speaks very quietly in Spanish and shrugs his shoulders.

“No Habla en Englas,” he stutters. The assassin frowns.

“I’m sorry, my Spanish is a little rusty. Let me try this approach.” The assassin steps towards the desk and pulls the smaller man up to his chair. He slams the laptop door on the soldier’s fingers and pushes the gun into the man’s face.

“Aaaaahhhhh. I don’t know! I don’t know!!!” he screams in English.

Seconds later two armed soldiers enter, one from the broken doorway, the other from the back entrance. The assassin pulls a second weapon from his waist and crosses both arms leaping into the air between the two men. He shoots each man with different weapon. They both fall lifeless to the floor. The assassin rises quickly from the floor, just in time to see the communication soldier reaching for his weapon handing in a holster on the wall.

“I wouldn’t do that!” the assassin shakes one finger in the air. The communications soldier grasps the gun handle as the assassin grabs a bloody knife from his breast pocket and throws it at the soldier pinning his hand to the wall. The soldier screams as the assassin approaches him.

“Now, think carefully,” he says and relaxes in a rolling chair as he comes closer to the soldier. The assassin pulls out another knife with a gleaming serrated edge.

“This next knife will cut something much more precious.” The knife catches the morning sun through the window and gleams of death. The assassin smiles, he enjoys his work. “Now I only save this knife for special occasions...” He runs his finger along the edge. The soldier sweats and looks at his free hand. The assassin shakes his head. The soldier looks to down to his crotch. The assassin nods his head. The soldier confesses.

“The village chapel, they will meet at the chapel!” he shrieks.

“Well, that wasn’t so hard now was it?” The assassin stands up and pulls his gun out of his holster. “You’ve been a good boy, now take a nap!” He hits him with the butt of his gun. The soldier slumps unconscious in his chair, his hand still pinned to the wall.

The assassin steps out of the cabin, smoke is billowing around him from the carnage. The ground erupts in a hail of bullets shot from above his head. A combat helicopter screams through the air passing above the cabin. The assassin pulls himself tight against the cabin and listens as something metallic rattles on the rooftop. Seconds later, the grenade lands at his feet. The concussive force blows the cabin into pieces and sends the assassin sailing through the air. He rolls and turns while landing on one knee, firing his gun at the grenade-throwing sentry in the tower. The assassin looks to the sky

to see the returning helicopter. The pilot has the assassin dead in his sights and fires a barrage of bullets from his machine gun. Twin rows of bullets rush death towards the assassin's body. The assassin aims knowing he has no cover and no place to run. He has to make his one shot count.

Crack!

The bullet hole appears in the helicopter windshield and the pilot never realizes his death as his lifeless hand lets go of the joystick. The helicopter drops out of the sky still racing towards the assassin. The assassin sees the oncoming blades and he races towards the trees. The helicopter smashes into the ground, skidding and sliding, its blades chopping everything in its path. Palm trees rip to shreds from the sharp steel blades. The distance closes between the assassin and the helicopter in seconds. Ten feet...five feet until the assassin has no more room to run and is pressed against the bubble windows of the helicopter. The blades come to a screeching stop as the copter's body stops inches from a large palm tree, pinning the assassin. Another foot closer would have crushed him. He can't move and fires at the windshield, shattering it into pieces. He steps forward over the dead pilot and through the copter and out.

In the distance, gunfire can be heard. The assassin cocks his gun and readies himself for more bloodshed.

"I love the smell of gun powder in the morning!" He takes two steps forward, trips, and falls flat on his face.

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

The assassin looks angry but a lot less threatening. His perfect hair is dishevelled and dirt covers his face. He looks disgusted at the older man who stands over him with a red blow horn. The camp's atmosphere has changed and is a bustle of activity as cameramen, gaffers, and stunt doubles spread around the movie set. The dead soldiers stand up and laugh at each other while drinking coffee. The smoke machine stops, allowing the movie stage to clear.

Unfortunately this is the final crucial scene being filmed for the major action movie release *Hostile Takeover*. The assassin is action star Steele Taylor, famous for dozens of action movies during the last fifteen years. Six foot one and two hundred pounds of muscled mayhem, he sports cropped blond hair and a constant frown on his weathered face. He's made millions with action movies in the past; but for the last three years he is desperately fighting to star in a movie that doesn't bomb.

“I hate f%#@ mornings! Where is my stunt double? I refuse to do that scene again!” Steele stands and wipes the dirt of his face and shirt. “Victor!” he yells 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 looks around the set.

“Steele, just relax and take a few breaths,” Victor tries to reassure the aging actor in his most empathic tone. Victor is a paunchy balding man who acts more of Steele’s cheerleader and guardian rather than his director. “Save some of your intensity for the movie. You were terrific, 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 is unable to take direction well unless it agrees with his own views. “Get Lance (Steele points to a stunt double with similar build standing on the sideline) to finish the scene.” Lance hears Steele’s comment and nods his head in agreement at Victor.

“No problem,” Lance replies. Victor motions him to hold tight and follows Steele.

“Steele, 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 cups his hands together to beg Steele to reconsider. Steele stops 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 cringes at Steele’s comments.

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

“Really, is that why the last three movies we’ve done have bombed, Victor?” Steele thumbs 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 turns and storms off the set.

“I’ll be in my trailer!” he hollers back at Victor.

Lance watches Steele depart and rolls his eyes.

“The ‘king’ walks off on his final shoot,” he laughs knowingly with the 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 shakes his head.

“Hey, his movie *The Assassin* broke box office records when it first came out eight years ago,” answers 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 for a lot of his movies, he was a pretty successful action star once. What’s happened to him?” the cameraman looks 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 one his movies. If only his few remaining fans knew what a jerk he really is. The guy’s washed up!”

Lance walks towards Victor onto the set to complete the scene.

As Steele marches to his trailer, his foul mood darkens. A young boy stands at the fence border and he waves a piece of paper at Steele. His initial reaction is to blow off this young fan; after all he’s a busy action star. But as he passes, the boy’s face reminds him of himself decades ago as he was clamouring for the autograph for the swash-buckling star ‘Errol Trent’. At age seven, he slipped away from home in the early morning and jumped on a bus without his mother’s permission. He pretended to be the son an executive who was walking onto the movie set and passed by unaware of 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 watching the filming before being kicked off the set. Despite the spanking his mother gave him when he got home, the crumpled paper cup became a trophy he placed on his shelf and it inspired him to his career. The boy’s question brings him back to reality.

“Aren’t you Steele Taylor?” the young boy jumps with excitement. Steele looks around him to make sure no one from the set is watching. He has a reputation of toughness to maintain and he didn’t want anyway seeing him approach the fan.

“In the flesh, are you here to see me?” he asks as steps 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 tries to pass his paper and pen through the fence. Steele hesitates.

“I don’t usually sign autographs,” the memory of his childhood star flashes through his mind. *Isn’t this part of the joy of being an action star? Why had it been so long that 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 passes the paper back through the fence. The boy snatches it and bounds away with excitement.

“Show it off, I can get hundred dollars for this on Ebay!” the boy runs around a corner of a building and disappears.

Steele is speechless. *That’s what the business has become for him, the money.*

He climbs up a few steps and enters the trailer, slamming the door behind him. He grabs a cell phone under a pile of clothes. He dials, hitting the speed number for his agent’s line. As the phone rings, Steele looks around the trailer and sees his face splashed across a number of ‘B’ action movies posters hanging on the walls. After three rings, the phone clicks as it is 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 is an attractive redhead named Toni Fountaine. She has represented Steele from the very early days of his career; in the beginning she ran her company from a seedy rundown hotel in Hollywood. She couldn’t afford a secretary and the walls very covered with post it notes with all the big names in action movies to remind her of meetings and appointments. Today, she works out of an elegant office in the heart of Los Angeles on Wilshire Boulevard.

She is a tough negotiator and has been the mastermind behind many of Steele’s successful action movies. Her management style has made millions for both of them. She’s had a long history with Steele and despite his grating personality, has always had a good relationship with him. She’s watched Steele’s career go from the box office heydays 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 direct to video release because I was desperate; I

hadn't worked for nine months before this! Do you know how much it costs to keep my house in Pasadena?"

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

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

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

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

Toni signs, this isn't the first time that Steele has used this idle threat. She's not 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 remains unfazed. He picks up a wrist weight and starts strengthening his hand.

"Don't give me that fan crap, people still 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!"

"That's what you said about this one." He leans back in his chair in front of his desk. "My movies are taking a dive into the toilet. I need something new, Toni, these morons on the set are wasting my talent. I'm a star, 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 jumps 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 the spotlight with anyone. Understand?"

"Steele, 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 paces around his trailer and kicks a trash can 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 a instant blockbuster!”

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

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

“Steele, there is nothing else. The last few movies you have done 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 stunt men 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 realizes he has no other choice but to accept Toni’s offer. But being gracious is not 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.”

A cork pops out of a wine bottle and hits a tiled floor. Classical music rings from a rich condo in Beverly Hills. Empty wine glasses are piled beside a tub. The bathroom is huge with a jacuzzi large enough to fit three people. Wolfe Neilson sits in a bubble bath with his hairy chest exposed waist deep in the water. He is in his early forties, tanned and muscular with dishevelled black hair. Compared to Steele’s bulk, he is lean and agile. Wolfe tends to portray

characters of grace, culture and elegance compared to Steele's no holds 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 pulls out a secret gadget or special weapon that saves the day. His cool, confident manner has given Wolfe the reputation of a womanizing bad boy and he is 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 alcoholism has not been as successful. Growing up in a poor abusive home has pushed him to succeed in action movies but the very demons that push him are the same ones that drive him to drink.

The phone rings, he drops his wine glass into the tub, searches for it, pulls it out, blows off the suds and takes another drink. He answers the phone.

"Welcome, this is Neilson, Wolfe Neilson at your service," his hand with the phone knocks some of the wine glasses down behind him.

"Wolfe, it's Toni."

"Hey, gorgeous, I was just thinking about you." He thumbs through a copy of Vogue magazine by the tub. Toni doesn't take the bait.

"I'm sure you were. I made the deal with Steele."

"You did?" Wolfe almost drops the magazine 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, the deal and you are through."

“Relax, I’ll be dry,” he splashes 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 will be at the restaurant at nine.”

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

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

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

“Only the pretty ones. See ya tonight” Wolfe puts 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. Wolfe looks at his hand in puzzlement as the ink has washed off.

“Now what time am I supposed to meet again?”

Toni hangs up the phone and looks around her office. She stands and walks around her mahogany desk to look out the 20th floor view facing downtown Los Angeles. Traffic slithers along numerous arteries through the heart of movie land.

“How am I going to keep this together?” she thinks. “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 picks up a promotional junket on Steele. “On the one hand, I have an actor who thinks the world revolves around his every whim, and he alienates 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 Two

Double Billing

Blackjack's Restaurant 8:05 p.m.

A white limousine pulls up at the trendy and exclusive Blackjack's restaurant of Beverly Hills. An elderly woman gets out of her car accompanied by a man half her age. She laughs and slaps his butt motioning him to go on ahead to get their table. The valet hands her a playing card with a listing of tonight's specials. Welcome to this month's restaurant fad for Hollywood's elite. The theme is gambling with waiters dressed as dealers and paintings of cards games hanging 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 most of the restaurant and gives them a bird's eye view of everyone entering and leaving. The air is warm and clear as the ocean breeze blows the smog inland. It's another beautiful LA evening. A waiter comes up to Steele and he points to his drink.

"Hit me!" Steele exclaims.

The waiter fills the glass and then hesitates before leaving, as if he wants to say something. Steele looks at the waiter and rolls his eyes.

"Yes?" Steele glares.

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

Steele takes a deep breath and motions to the waiter to come closer so he can 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 points and the manager looks over and Steele waves.

"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 rushes off in a hurry. Steele looks over at Toni.

“Great job, Toni, 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? There may come a day when no one wants your autograph anymore.”

“Yeah, whatever, Toni,” He dismisses her with a wave. He remembers his early encounter with the kid and his autograph and it makes him mad.

“Where is Wolfe?”

Toni leans forward in her chair.

“He’s coming, don’t worry.” She opens her briefcase and hands Steele a docket of papers. “Let’s go over the contract. The two of you will get equal billing and remuneration.” Steele scans 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 \$800 million worldwide. Your BO just crossed the \$700 mil mark.”

“Jesus, Toni, the man had a couple fluke hits in the late eighties that put his dollar value up there. 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 slams 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 do, 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 said I’d do the movie, but my name appears first on the credits, okay?”

Toni shakes her head in disbelief. Steele looks over at the main entrance. "Hey look, the drunk's here."

Wolfe Neilson opens the door to his classic red 1963 Chevy Impala Super Sport convertible. He tosses his keys to the valet and shares a joke with the hostess. He waves to people at the tables, shakes hands with a few of the waiters and generally works the crowd. Wolfe could have been a politician in another life. Steele watches Wolfe and shakes his head.

"Look at that lush trying to talk up the waitress. He's pathetic!"

"You know it wouldn't hurt to be friendly to the people around you...for a change." She kicks him under the table. Steele is unfazed.

"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 watches Wolfe approach the table. "Oh great, here it comes." Toni gets up and embraces Wolfe. He gives her a kiss on the cheek.

"Hi ya, sweetie; you are definitely working too hard. Have you 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 sniffs the air and then pulls Wolfe aside. She whispers in his ear.

"You smell like a breath mint, Wolfe; please tell me you haven't been drinking?" Wolfe turns his head to her ear.

"Toni, I'm offended. You can't have bad breath when meeting one's adoring public. Besides you never know when you might kiss a beautiful woman." He tries to kiss Toni who turns her head away. She looks over to Steele whose has been watching but couldn't hear their conversation.

"Wolfe, I'm sure you know Steele."

Wolfe reaches a hand out to Steele.

"Hey, buddy, I hear you want to be in my movie. That's great, you'll be an excellent sidekick." Steele jumps out of his chair in shock.

"Your movie! Your sidekick!" A vein almost bursts in Steele's forehead, as he turns red with rage.

"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 the workday is over."

Steele stands up and turns to Toni.

“This is ridiculous, I thought you told this has-been about his role in this picture?” Wolfe has a huge smirk on his face.

“Relax, Steele,” Toni looks at Wolfe, “I think Wolfe is pulling your leg.”

Wolfe is bent over with one arm supporting his weight on the table as he laughs deeply.

“Beautiful and observant, what a combination.” Wolfe winks at Toni and then looks over at Steele.

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

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

“Well you got it half right. Waiter!”

A waiter comes from the bar and places a drink on the table.

“What’s this?” Wolfe sniffs at his drink.

“The lady requested your drink beforehand, sir.”

“Which is...”

“I thought ice tea would be quite refreshing on a cool spring evening. Cheers,” Toni clinks her glass with his and laughs.

“Wonderful,” Wolfe takes a sip and makes a face as if he was drinking poison. “I must remember to never come here again.” Steele is tapping his foot as his patience begins to run out.

“Anybody ready to talk business yet?” Steele asks. Wolfe begins to talk into his watch.

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

“Will you grow up? 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 pauses as he looks at Steele and then continues to talk into his watch. “Subject is extremely agitated, please proceed with extreme caution.”

Toni puts her arm between the two them to get their focus back on her. “That’s enough, both of you. Let’s get to the business at hand.”

Toni opens up a binder with copies of the scripts attached.

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

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

“All the marketing costs in the world for your last picture still couldn’t get fans to see it,” snarls Wolfe.

“Enough, boys, settle down. Open your scripts to page thirty-eight.” Toni pulls open her script as Wolfe and Steele grab their copies and turn the pages. They read the section to themselves. Toni looks 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. You love to blame me when it’s as much your fault as mine!”

Toni looks puzzled. “What really happened between the two of you?”

They both glare at each other.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” they say in unison.

Toni dismisses the two of them with her hand. “At least the two of you agree on something. Now what happened in the past stays in the past. Both 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 stunt.”

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

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

“Jesus, Steele, you treat everyone like garbage. Ever wonder that you’re to blame for some of the bad movies you’re made.” Steele looks at Toni.

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

“He’s got a point!” Toni jumps in.

“What is this, why are you siding with him? I thought you were my agent?” asks Steele.

“On this project, I represent both of your huge egos. Besides, you know me, I always call a spade, a spade!” Toni pulls out a card from the deck on the table and lays it down. It is the Queen of Spades.

Steele looks at the card

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

“What’s wrong, Steele, are you feeling a little flabby?” Wolfe makes a muscle and kisses his bicep. “I could ‘pump you up.’” He strikes a pose.

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

“What?” they both reply.

She drops the menu onto the table.

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

As they continue deep in their negotiations, a black limo stops at the front of the restaurant. The limo door opens and out steps 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 looks into his car mirror to check 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 knows it. He’s shallow, not in love with making movies but in love with the money and fame that come with success. He believes his own press.

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

On either side, two identical twin bodyguards walk beside him; two huge deported Greeks from the island of Crete. They are massive and hairy. At the beach with their shirts off, it would be easy to mistake them as furry gorillas. Both men are beefy meatheads, short on brainpower but huge on brawn. They are retired 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 is sparse. These two watchdogs would stand out anywhere they go. Their clothes show off their hairy chests and gold chains, a gaudy wrestling look that was appropriate ten years ago.

Patrons in the restaurant notice Blaze and his entourage, creating a greater arrival buzz than our two aging action heroes. The hostess escorts the three of them to the other side of the restaurant to sit at a table by a huge fountain. It is the best seat in the house and overlooks the entire restaurant.

“Hey, Blaze, check out the table over there,” the bodyguard points 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 bends 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 those two,” he points as his bodyguards respond. “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 picks up a menu.

“Speaking of competition, do you see who just walked in?” Toni points and both men look up just in time to see Blaze cover his face with a menu.

“Blaze Vansome, young action star on the rise. He worked as my stunt man on one of my movie years ago. The guy’s arrogance makes Steele look like Mother Theresa,” says Wolfe.

“Arrogance? I heard Vansome’s so full of himself that the guy empties out a gym before he’ll work out in it. The negative *energies* from other people ruins his workout,” comments Steele.

“Mock him all you want, 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 chastises the two of them.

“I’m not going to waste any time training with that idiot, Toni!” Steele points at Wolfe.

“What’s wrong, are you worried that beside better looking, that I can lift more than you?” laughs 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 holds out his arm across the table to lock wrists with Steele in a classic challenge of arm wrestling. Steele gladly obliges.

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

“It’s not just brute strength, it’s technique.” Wolfe begins to take advantage and begins to pull Steele’s arm down.

“In the end, superior strength will win the day.” Steele takes control and pulls Wolfe’s arm towards the table. They are both struggling to keep their grips but gasp from the exertion as their faces become exceedingly red.

“Apologize or suffer the consequences,” Steele croaks.

“You first,” Wolfe gasps.

MEN OF EXTREME ACTION

The rest of the restaurant quiets down and focuses on the battle. The waiters rush to put an end to the dispute. Toni stops them with a twenty-dollar bill. "Let's see how this plays out."

Wolfe leans close to the table. "Asshole!" he yells.

Steele leans even closer. "Alcoholic!" he grunts.

Both are gasping harder and harder for air. Neither one will give up.

Toni stands up to go and drops a card between the two of them as she leaves.

"We'll see you two lovebirds at this gym tomorrow at seven a.m. if you both want a job. Bye boys." She saunters out the main entrance.

The two of them look at her as she leaves, and then back at each other with hatred. Their faces are as red as beets.

"Give up!" cries Wolfe.

"You first!" squawks Steele.

The table collapses sending both actions stars tumbling to the ground in an embarrassing heap.

Chapter Three

Mind Games

Day One—Iron Dog’s Gym 7 a.m.

The logo in front of the gym is a pit bull with a steel jaw locked onto a meat bone. Iron Dog’s is your typical muscle-bound gym with patrons who lack the anatomical feature of a neck and who experiment with various levels of steroid abuse. The gym is 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 ensues with the smell of old sweat in the air. The gym is located on the movie set with an exclusive list of clients. Only an ‘A’ list of actors and stunt people possess the privilege to work out here, training before and during a gruelling movie shoot.

A short but muscular, bald Asian man walks into the gym with a cane in his right hand. He is one of the most sought after trainers in the action movie business, obtaining an almost cult-like status among its stars. His training mixes a high level of physical and mental training that takes his students to a higher level. He is known for his unorthodox training methods giving considerable pain to his trainees. But his plans must be followed to the letter for the trainee to become successful, no exceptions. He has trained at this gym for many years; few major stars have not been under his tutelage at one point in their careers.

Today two new students will enter his life.

He observes and studies the activity around him and quickly scribbles something on a notepad. He looks at his watch. The clock on the wall strikes seven a.m. and Steele walks in. He is dressed in the latest athletic gear and looks like he showered for the workout. He walks over to the bald man.

“You the trainer for the movie? I’m ready to go, where do I begin?” The Asian man measures Steele for several seconds before answering.

“Patience, my pupil, your 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 picks up a barbell and starts doing bench curls.

“That is where you are mistaken, we will be working out your mind before we begin to salvage anything with your body,” Pang nudges Steele’s leg with his cane. Steele puts down the barbell and laughs.

“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*?” Steele makes buffing motions with his hands. Mr. Pang nods his head as if he understands everything about Steele.

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

“Yeah, whatever, Mr. Meiogi.”

Steele goes over and begins to work out on one of the machines. Wolfe walks in several minutes later looking like he just rolled out of bed. He has bed head; his clothes are ripped and torn as if he was in a fight with a tiger. Wolfe is not a morning person. Steele sees him enter the gym and walks up behind him.

“Good morning,” he snickers.

Wolfe is jittery and bumps into the weight pile knocking a few to the ground.

“What’s wrong, Wolfe, not used to getting up before noon?”

Wolfe regains his balance and shrugs his head.

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

“If 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 looks more carefully at Steele. He notices that Steele looks 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’ve never heard of it the way you smell.”

Wolfe looks at Steele in disgust. “You got dressed up and washed to work out? You know 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 pushes down a cowlick. “I had just about enough of you this morning.” Wolfe steps threatening towards Steele.

Steele puts his face two inches from Wolfe's face. "What are you going to do it about it?"

Mr. Pang steps 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 stop and look at each other.

"Who's the Kung-fu guy?" Wolfe asks Steele.

"He's our instructor, watch out or he'll get you to wash his car," Steele laughs.

Mr. Pang grabs Steele's thumb and pushes him down to the floor. Steele's laughter turns to cries as he kneels on the floor.

"Stop it, you hurting me!"

"No, keep going, you're killing me," Wolfe is almost double over with laughter at seeing the much smaller man take Steele down. "If you guys are going to play for a while, I could use a drink."

Wolfe starts to walk past and is immediately brought down by Mr. Pang who grabs his thumb with his other arm. Wolfe drops to his knees and begins whaling 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 turns his head slightly through his pain.

"Foot, this guy is ripping my thumb out of it socket, owwww," Wolfe moans.

"Maybe next time you help me out instead of laughing, owwww." Steele grimaces

Both are crying 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 releases their hands.

"Well, you're a real motivator," adds Wolfe as he nurses his thumb.

"You know I won't be able to wash your car with my bum hand," says Steele.

"Your sarcasm will bring you much pain. Now drop and given me twenty pushups.

"But my hand hurts"

"In that case make it thirty."

"But..."

"Forty!"

“I suggest you do it unless you want your thumb removed,” Wolfe whispers to Steele. Steele drops to the floor and gives forty pushups, howling on each one as it hurts his thumb. Wolfe approaches 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 looks at Wolfe in silence as if sizing him up and then speaks.

“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 backs 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 flashes a toothy smile, “then I can remove either one of you from the movie.”

“What did you say?” Steele has finished and looks at the photocopy contract that Mr. Pang hands 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 stands with his arms crossed. “To do whatever I ask you to do.”

Both Steele and Wolfe look at each other and in their minds wonder if they are having some sort of common nightmare.

“Are you both ready to begin?” Mr. Pang flashes another playful grin and moves to one of the weight machines. Wolfe whispers to Steele.

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

“What?” Steele whispers back.

“Pain, torture and agony!”

Iron Dog's Sauna 8:10 a.m.

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

"What the hell was that about? I've got muscles that I didn't know existed that are hurting," Steele tries 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."

"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 mornings are for..."

"...sleeping, I get it," says Steele

Dong! A loud gong sound is heard through the intercom.

"All right, breakfast, I'm starved." Steele rubs his hands in anticipation.

They find their remaining energy and put their robes on over their towels and rush to the foyer. There is a dining room that is separated from the gym. At one end is a door to the outside where golf carts pick up stars to take them back to the movie set. They sit down at a table with plates and utensils. Mr. Pang approaches with two covered plates.

"Can't wait, I'm starved," says Wolfe.

"Then by all means, dig in." Mr. Pang pulls off the cover to reveal two dishes of something that resembles eggs and bacon.

Wolfe and Steele look at each other and then look back at Mr. Pang.

"Pang, what's this?" asks Wolfe.

"My students, 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 feel like purging right now," Steele stares at the food.

"Flushing seems more appropriate to me," remarks Wolfe.

"Don't worry; from now on, I've made the chef on the set aware of your special needs."

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

"How did he do that?" asks Wolfe.

"Toni!" Steele cries.

Meeting with Toni 8:30 a.m.

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

“Toni, what the hell are you doing to us? That trainer is a power tripping, *Karate Kid* reject, authoritative, bossy...”

“Maniac!” Wolfe jumps in.

“Yea, a maniac!”

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

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

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

“I’m hungry! I’d kill for a chocolate bar,” Wolfe yells to the young intern driving. “Hey, kid, can you stop at a vending machine?”

The intern looks at them and then at Toni who shakes her head. Wolfe slumps back into his seat and then looks at Toni. “You wouldn’t have any in your purse, would you?” Wolfe looks at Steele. “Let’s get her.”

Toni pulls out a can of mace from her purse causing the two of them to back up.

“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 an hour a day. You need to clean up your act to have a hope in hell of making a profit on this movie. Are you going to give Mr. Pang a chance or are you giving up like a bunch of losers?”

They bow their heads in shame.

Wolfe looks at Steele “She’s tough!”

Steele looks 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 stares both of them down.

“Everything?” They say in unison as they raise their heads.

“Yes, everything!” Toni yells. “Enough of your complaining. Let’s go over the shooting schedule with the location manager.”

“Okay, okay,” Wolfe raises his hands in resignation and looks 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 Two

8:05 a.m.

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 are poring off their faces. The two of them look at each other in a silent pained expression as if each wants to say something to the other. The sound effect stops. A hand stops a disc player. Mr. Pang looks over from across the room, sitting on the bench in his robe.

“The sound of that wind doesn’t make it any cooler in here,” spits Steele. The three of them are sitting in the gruelling hot cramped quarters of the sauna.

“Nor does the sound of your voice, keep your coats on another minute,” Mr. Pang commands.

“Way to go, big mouth, always got something to say.” Wolfe plugs Steele in the shoulder.

“Make that two additional minutes,” Mr. Pang calmly decrees and then moves his legs into a meditative yoga position and closes his eyes.

Both actors silently face off each other as if to strike. Then after thinking about the repercussions, both bodies slump into quiet submission. Both faces look flushed from the heat and look on the verge of passing out. Mr. Pang looks at his watch; both look at him in anticipation. He rises; both men get their arms on the edge of their collars, ready to take their coats off. Mr. Pang looks away and grabs another part of his newspaper. Both are dejected and Steele looks ready to curse, Wolfe puts a finger to his lips to get him to shut up. Mr. Pang looks over as both men compose themselves and smile back. Mr. Pang looks away.

“Time,” Mr. Pang says.

“Thank, Jesus, another minute and I would have dropped from heat exhaustion,” Steele unzips and throws 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 holds his jacket and droplets of

sweat drip to the wooden floor. He drops his coat and the action stars begin to walk to the door.

“Wait, you have passed the test but have you learned the lesson?” Mr. Pang inquires as both men stop and turn to face him.

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

Mr. Pang looks at the discarded jackets. Both men realize what is going to happen if they don’t play along. Not wanting to risk wearing the jackets again, they both sit down.

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

“Well, we sweated,” Steele wipes his forehead.

“A lot,” Wolfe dabs 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 yells. “Stop thinking about yourselves for one minute. What is the lesson? What have you learned?”

Both look 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 points to Wolfe

“I did not!” Wolfe yells

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

Mr. Pang leans on his cane and stands up.

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

Both shrug their shoulders and head out the door to the showers. Steele turns around and notices Pang has disappeared again from the room. Steele taps Wolfe’s shoulder.

“Pang disappeared again.”

“Wish he’d stay that way,” replies Wolfe.

They walk past the lockers and into a wide-open space where the showers are located. Wolfe grabs his shower kit. Most shower stalls have a divider that comes up to their shoulders. They both hit the cold water and react positively after the sweathouse of the sauna.

“Wow, that cold water feels good,” Wolfe leans back towards the showerhead.

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

“I don’t, but I’m not a morning person. I can’t seem to shake this fog,” Wolfe slaps his head a couple of times.

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

“Now that you mention it.” He puts a towel over the shower kit and waves his hand over his towel like a wand. “Voila” He pulls a beer out and cracks it open. “Ahhhhhh, nectar of the gods. Want a drink?”

Steele leans over to Wolfe’s stall in disbelief.

“You’re disgusting, is there any type of alcohol that you won’t drink? It’s nine a.m. 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 takes another swig of beer.

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

Wolfe takes another sip.

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

Steele eyes smoulder at Wolfe. “You are an asshole and you’re going to ruin my life again just like in my movie *Vengeance*.”

Wolfe spits out some of 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 make a break in the movie business. We both made our mistakes. Get over her.”

“Easy for you to say, you go through women like automatic weapons. 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.”

“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 pushes Wolfe backwards. “Don’t you understand? I really cared about her, more than any woman since.”

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

“Not then, Wolfe. But I’ll never know what would have happened because of you.” Steele douses his head with water from the showerhead.

Wolfe looks angry. “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. We’re both different people now. We’ve changed.”

“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’re right, what’s in the past is over. I’ve gotten over you and her, but don’t ever expect me to forgive you.”

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

“Not all problems can be solved out of a bottle. But you haven’t figured that out yet.”

Wolfe looks at his beer bottle and talks to it as if it is a friend. “There, there,” he pets the beer bottle, “our friend is so angry, you’d never let me down, would you my best bud?” He laughs and then waits a second.

“What’s that?” He mimics that the beer is talking to him and presses his ear against the neck of the bottle. Wolfe nods his head in agreement. “You’re my best friend. Unfortunately, I can only 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 looks at the beer. “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 reaches for the faucet while Wolfe raises his arm to throw the beer bottle.

A female’s voice breaks the stalemate.

“Hi, boys, how’s everyone getting along this morning?” Toni yells from the entrance of the men’s washroom. Both men freeze.

“Great, hold on a minute,” yells Wolfe, then whispers 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,” Toni’s footsteps rap lightly on the tile floor.

“Hold on, Toni!” Wolfe yells.

“Wolfe, it’s not like you to be bashful. Besides, I’ve seen it all, I had three brothers you know.” She enters the locker room and is about to round the corner to the showers. Wolfe is desperate, he turns 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 points at Steele, “kicked off the movie.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.” Wolfe whispers.

“Give it to me, you stupid idiot!”

Wolfe thrusts the bottle over the stall divider and into Steele’s hands, which are by his waist. Toni rounds the corner to see Wolfe reaching his hand into Steele’s stall towards his waist. Steele looks like he holding... something.

Toni stops in amazement.

“Am I interrupting something, boys?” She puts her finger to her lips.

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

“That’s right, Wolfe. Hahahahah.”

Both laugh in deep manly voices.

“Something is going on for the two of you to be joking with each other.” Toni tilts her head to one side in puzzlement. “Wolfe, look at me.”

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

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

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

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

“Yesssss,” he stammers.

“Normally, what a man does in his own shower is own business, but are you holding something?”

She sees his chest and head, but the shower stall obscures his arms, which are down by his waist.

“Nothing.”

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

“Wait a minute, I’m not touching myself if that’s what you’re thinking.” He starts to lose grip on the beer and it starts to pour out. Toni looks below the stall and sees an increasingly yellow rush of liquid. She is disgusted.

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

She looks down again as the beer continues to pour faster. She starts to walk 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.”

MEN OF EXTREME ACTION

“But I’m not peeing, it’s, it’s.....ahhhhhhhhhh!!!!” Steele screams in frustration as he realizes he can’t tell the truth without incriminating himself.

Toni exits out the door to the men’s change room and disappears into the hall. Steele looks 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 pushes a finger into Wolfe’s face.

“Relax Steele, I just wanted to say thanks.” He holds out his hand for Steele to shake. Steele looks at it and walks pass grabbing his towel. He leaves the shower to go the change room and places the beer bottle by the garbage can. Wolfe follows and picks up the bottle. He cradles the beer bottle and then talks in a lower tone to the bottle again.

“I’m sorry, buddy, he didn’t mean to waste you. Never again.” He tries to take one last drink but the bottle is empty. He sees himself in the mirror talking to the bottle. His smile turns to a frown as he realizes that he is slowly losing his battle with the bottle.

Chapter Four

Hanging by a Thread

Day Two—*Men of Extreme Action* Movie Set 9 a.m.

After the showers, Steele, Wolfe, and Toni jump into a golf cart that takes them to their set on the movie lot. After passing through security, the three of them enter the side door of a huge sound stage. Toni marches Wolfe and Steele to the green screen background where numerous wires and cables hang from the catwalk above. The studio is a hive of activity with several sets of jungle interiors, rock faces and even a river flows through the center of the warehouse, all needed for the shooting of the movie. Toni points out a large man in the distance talking to several crew members.

“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 gestures with his hands in a wing motion.

“Steele, don’t you watch any movies but your own? Haven’t you seen what young punks are doing these days? It’s acrobatics, man, it’s making amazing leaps and kicks that defy gravity. It’s all the rage.” Wolfe makes gestures as if he is making flying kicks.

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

“I’ve been meaning to. I haven’t been able to coordinate my plan into action. I end up letting the stunt double do these scenes.”

“Which sounds like a perfectly good idea to me, Toni.” Steele looks 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.”

“You’ll have no movie if I break my neck up there,” Steele grabs at his neck and points at the cables.

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

“Toni!” cries Wolfe.

“I’m joking. Here comes the coordinator, he doesn’t take any nonsense from actor types, so be good boys.” Toni strolls off of the set.

The coordinator is a big man, a powerhouse; same height as our actors but much more broader. He talks 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 you done many of your own stunts?”

“You bet!” they shout in unison.

“Of course!” Nash looks at them surprisingly. “That’s funny,” he says, “the little lady over there,” Nash points to Toni who waves, “says the two of you always pawn off the hard work to your stunt team.”

Both actors look at each other.

“Well, sometimes.”

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

Nash frowns. “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 pulls two cables hanging down from the ceiling. As he unwires the harness, Nash cuts himself on the sharp serrated edge of the clasp. He looks at the cut with disdain but continues to unloop the cable.

“Aren’t you going to bandage your finger before you bleed all over the place,” comments Steele.

Nash casually looks at his hand and sticks his finger in Steele’s face, “I don’t have time to bleed.” He continues to unravel the wires.

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

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

Several minutes later, Nash has strapped both men into their harnesses. Wires jut out from the harness in all directions, which attach into a complicated grip mechanism in the ceiling. Wolfe is hanging completely off the floor, his legs unable to touch the ground. Steele is 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 slaps Steele on the back.

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

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

“Kick your ass! Hahhahahah.” Wolfe laughs hysterically but Steele is not amused.

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

“Don’t mind, Steele, he lacks social graces.” Wolfe looks back at Steele. “It would seem that the last thing you want to do is piss off your stunt coordinator.”

Nash walks over to Steele and examines the harness in detail, not saying a word, fuelling Steele’s frustration. Nash purposefully tightens the belt a notch too tight over the crotch causing Steele’s face to redden.

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

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

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

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

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

“The word *please* will do wonders.” Nash loosens 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 planned and coordinated by me.” Nash pumps his fist over his chest on the word *me*. Anyone have a problem with that?” He looks at Steele

“No.”

“No, sir,” adds Wolfe.

“Good! It is my job to train you to do most of your own stunts helping the production save time and money. Hell, I believe it adds more realism to the picture. Nothing like doing your own stunts. Right, Wolfe?”

“You’re talking to a former stunt man, I did some amazing stuff starting out in my career.”

“What stunts have you done lately?” Nash asks. Steele edges closer to hear Wolfe’s reply. Wolfe thinks for a moment.

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

“Bullshit!” Steele yells. “Your stunt double did that! You haven’t tried anything complicated in years.”

“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 any more.”

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

“I’m sure you can,” comments Nash. “I’m sure you want to do as many dangerous stunts as you can.”

“Dangerous...”

“Stunts?”

“Of course. Didn’t Toni tell you in this picture we’re going to really push the envelope? Your movie’s going to set a new mark for action.” Nash slaps Wolfe on the back.

“Hell, I need a drink,” quips Wolfe.

Nash looks serious. “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 pulls down on a cable above Steele to test its strength.

“Wolfe has a hard time performing without thinking about alcohol. If you put a beer bottle in front of his face it would really motivate him.” Steele gestures his hand in front of Wolfe like a carrot in front of a horse.

Nash shakes 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 look at themselves.

Nash smiles. “You’ll find out.” He walks around them and checks the cables. “We’re all set. Let me explain the rules.” Both heroes hang 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 the end 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 center, wins. This exercise is meant to help develop your coordination. All you have to do is swing in the harness and hit the center of the target with either your fist or foot.”

“This is too easy,” Wolfe laughs nervously.

Nash motions to several stagehands that step to the side of the stage. Their hands rest on the ends of the cables. Both Wolfe and Steele look at each other in uneasy trepidation. Nash looks at the actors with a grin and states, “Let the training begin.”

Wolfe wins the coin toss and goes first. He sizes up the target for several seconds, planning his attack.

“Hurry up already,” yells Steele.

Wolfe takes a running start and gives a martial arts kick directly towards the target. As he jumps into the air the cables take him off the ground. He goes up. And up. And his front leg keeps going up. Thirty degrees. Forty-five degrees. He keeps pointing up until his leg is vertical in the air. Wolfe’s body slams into the wall missing the target.

“Ouch!” He bites his lip and sinks to the ground.

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

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

“Good try.” Nash walks up to Wolfe as the crew manipulate his cables to bring his body horizontal with the floor again.

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

Steele has a look of intense concentration on his face as he takes a sprinter start and explodes into a run and does a spinning back kick in the air. The first spin is perfect and Steele grins. The second spin is almost as good as the first. Then he spins 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 rushes up to Steele whose head is stuck in the target. Nash and a few other crew members also slowly approach.

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

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

Nash motions to the stagehand to not disengage Steele from the target.

“I’ll only say this once,” Nash whispers menacingly in 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 don’t have ten movies to my credit 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. If you want to survive? Do you understand?”

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

“Drop him,” he motions to the stagehand. Steele lands in a heap.

Nash looks at Steele. “This *lousy* stunt man is taking a break.” Nash looks around the set.

“Everyone take five.” The crew disperses murmuring about what has taken place. Wolfe unclips himself from the harness and goes 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 yet where someone hasn’t tried to kill you.”

Steele is fighting to disengage himself from his harness. “Just leave me alone.”

“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.”

“And you can play an alcoholic like an Oscar nominee.”

“You can’t let up, can you, Steele. Someday, I’m going to control my drinking problem, but you’ll never stop being an asshole.” Wolfe unclips one of Steele’s cables causing him dangle down headfirst. Wolfe walks away.

“Come back here! Get me out of this right away. Somebody help me!” Steele hangs in the air, blood rushing to his head, as he demands for someone to let him down.

10 minutes later after the break

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

“Has everyone had a chance to cool off?” Nash looks at Steele who 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 points at Steele.

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

“If he is going to hit me, can I hit him back?” Steele asks.

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

“You don’t say,” Wolfe adds.

“Sarcasm aside, there seems to be only one solution to your mutual problem.” Nash points to an assistant. “Franco, can you throw over the duffle bag?” The assistant grabs it and tosses it over. Nash pulls 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 step over to the equipment. Two assistants help lace up and tape their gloves on. Large vests are placed 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 grins.

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

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

“If you are done trading corny action lines, I’ll lay down the ground rules.” He points to the stagehands “Strap them in.” As they strap the cable harnesses on again, Nash looks 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 touches the bull’s-eye on Wolfe’s shirt padding. Both men nod.

“Hit it hard enough and it will make a sound,” he punches Steele hard in the chest to demonstrate and the baffle makes a squeaking sound. Steele steps back from the blow.

“That’s the only time I’ll get hit,” says Steele as Nash continues 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?”

“Just one. What’s at stake for the loser?” Steele asks.

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

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

They hit gloves and their cables are rotated into the shadows of the set. The set walls have 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 yells 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 turns on to left, Steele steps into it, fists down, head up.

A spotlight turns on to the right, Wolfe steps out, fists out, a grin on his face.

“Go!” yells Nash

The fight begins. Both men take running starts towards the other, the space between them diminishing in seconds. Wolfe jumps into the air to kick Steele in the chest. Steele anticipates and blocks with his hands, which propels him to a higher elevation on a nearby wall. The block causes Wolfe to twist around 180 degrees, he quickly checks to make sure no cables are twisted. Steele uses this split second to make his attack. He makes a running leap, his fists out to strike Wolfe. Wolfe does a forward flip to evade the punch as Steele’s body hits the background.

“I’m starting to get the hang of this,” Wolfe admires his agility just as an overhang pops into his flight plan hitting him straight in the head. The impact causes him to flip head over feet and come slamming into the wall. Wolfe shakes his head and hears Steele’s war cry from behind.

“Oh no,” murmurs Wolfe.

He turns around straight into Steele’s oncoming kick.

“Squeak!”

“They all fall before me! I got you, loser!” yells Steele as he drops to the ground after the impact.

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

“The score is 1-0 for Steele,” Nash yells. Both men ready themselves into fighter’s poses. Nash raises and then drops his right hand. “Begin!”

Steele gets off to another running start, he is pumped after his last hit. Wolfe stands still, head down, fists out. A defeated target. Steele is charging closer yet Wolfe doesn’t move.

He’s given up. I took more out him than I thought, thinks Steele. Steele takes a flying kick at Wolfe’s chest. Wolfe looks up at the last second with a huge grin on his face and moves slightly to the right to miss Steele’s advancing kick. Steele’s intense look changes to shock as he slams into the wall behind Wolfe. Dazed, he gets up and he spins around to the fist of Wolfe who punches Steele right in the chest.

“Squeak!” Steele’s chest sounds off.

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

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

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

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

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

Steele doesn’t turn but flips Wolfe the universal signal.

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

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

Steele steps forward first, and then stops, watching Wolfe. Wolfe moves forward one step and then stops, watching Steele. Neither takes another step, not wanting to be the one who makes a mistake.” Nash looks exasperated.

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

Both heroes look at Nash and then launch themselves into action. Both charge towards the other in a game of chicken to see who will veer first. A split second before collision both combatants turn in opposite directions. Steele takes the high road jumping onto the balcony of one of the walls. Wolfe jumps below obscured by the stones of the outcropping.

“One minute and thirty seconds,” yells Nash.

Steele jumps down and leaps towards Wolfe. Wolfe jumps towards Steele and then leaps over his head and onto the balcony where Steele had come from.

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

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

He runs at the wall and then uses it to spin kick backwards right at Steele’s head. Steele looks alarmed and tries to duck the kick and succeeds, but Wolfe tangles one of his feet around Steele’s cables. Steele tries to jump away, but ends up caught in Wolfe’s cables.

“One minute left!”

Steele laughs at Wolfe who is trying to disengage himself from Steele’s cable.

“Time to go for a ride,” Steele jeers and jumps off in the opposite direction. This movement pulls Wolfe behind him ensnaring him even more in the cables.

“Got you now!” says Steele. He jumps at Wolfe who leans to the side to evade the punch.

“Not so fast, two can play at this game.” Now that he is firmly caught in Steele’s cables, he finds solid footing and jumps away pulling Steele behind him.

“Hey, cut that out!”

“Watch it you two, those cables are expensive,” yell Nash.

Wolfe comes to a stop and Steele slams into the wall entangling himself more.

“All’s fair that ends fair, buddy.” The two of them are firmly ensnarled in the others cables and each motion tangles them more.

“Thirty seconds!”

“I’ll get you yet!” Steele swings at Wolfe only to get his arm caught in the cables. Both take several punches making the situation worse.

“Looks like it’s going to be a draw after all,” says one crewman to Nash.

Neither Wolfe and Steele can get either feet or fists free to hit the bulls-eye on the other’s chest. It’s a stalemate.

Wolfe has a thought. He can’t get his arms or legs free, so he uses the only part of his body that isn’t tangled. He swings like a pendulum, pushes back and comes in head first on Steele’s chest. Very lightly, his head taps the bull’s-eye on Steele’s chest.

“Squeak,” it weakly sounds.

“Time!” yells Nash. “The winner is Wolfe, by a head.” Nash raises Wolfe’s hand in victory. Steele is furious with himself.

“No fair, his punch was so weak it barely registered. I want another chance.” Nash shakes his head.

“A strike’s a strike no matter how weak the squeak.” Nash signals to the crew “All right everyone, fun and games are over, Let’s wrap it up and move onto the next scene. The crew heads off in different directions; leaving Steele and Wolfe to untangle themselves.

“Don’t forget our bet,” Wolfe points at Steele.

At that moment, Steele’s cable disengages from its knot and his head swings straight into Wolfe’s groin. Steele is ready to lose it from this latest humiliation as Wolfe pushes him away.

“I need a drink!” moans Steele.

“Now you’re talking, Steele,” smirks Wolfe.

Chapter Five

When Egos Collide

Evening—The Cage Nightclub *11 p.m.*

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

"If Toni or Pang saw you right now, your action career would be over."

"Don't be so 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 continues to fidget. "Are you almost done, Wolfe, I'm ready to head out."

"Relax, Steele what's the rush? Stop acting like you're gay!"

"Gay! I'm as straight as the next guy! What the hell are you talking about?" Steele stands up, angry by Wolfe's comment.

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

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

"You're a bitter man, Steele. You'll never meet anyone if you believe you're already lost her before you even try. You need some help."

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

“I haven’t had that much to drink.” Wolfe signals 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 gestures to the crowd around them. “Of course, you have to think of something nice to say for once.”

“I suppose the great Wolfe Neilson is going to give me tips on how to pick up women. No thanks, I can manage on my own.”

“You’ve been really successful so far tonight,” Wolfe adds 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.”

“I can quit anytime I chose. What’s the problem, a few drinks aren’t going to kill me?”

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

Wolfe gives his best-depressed face.

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

“Hello!” Wolfe exclaims as he turns to face her. In front of him is a tall blond bombshell with long curly hair wearing a red dress that leaves nothing to the imagination. Beside her is a slightly shorter but no less beautiful raven-haired model with pouty lips. She hides behind her blond friend as if waiting to see what she will say.

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

“In the flesh,” Wolfe turns his charm on maximum. Steele cringes. The dark-haired girl looks past Wolfe towards Steele. She nudges her friend.

“I think that’s Steele Taylor beside him,” she giggles.

Steele stands. “This is an exclusive club and I paid good money not to be harassed. Would an autograph get rid of you?” He reaches into his pocket for some paper and pulls out a pen.

“It’s definitely him, Julie, he’s mean just like the tabloids said,” April giggles. Wolfe spits out half of his drink. He pokes Steele in the ribs and laughs.

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

“Excuse Steele, he’s practicing his lines for tomorrow and he’s staying in character. Won’t you join us for a drink?” Both women sit at the bar, Julie faces Wolfe while April sits next to Steele.

“What brings you lovely ladies here tonight?” Wolfe looks into April’s eyes as he takes another drink.

“Well,” replies April, “I just had a try out for a modeling agency while my friend Julie just 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 adds sarcastically.

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

“Aren’t you supposed to be in detox? Are you feeling okay, should you be drinking?” April’s concern is genuine. Steele snorts in pleasure that Wolfe’s faults are as widely publicized as his.

“Don’t believe everything you read, my dear.” He shoots Steele a look. “Are you ladies on your own?” Both girls look around. April points at a balding man with about twenty extra pounds flashing his card to two women sitting at a table.

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

“I bet he does,” Steele smirks at the obvious false promises of a typical Hollywood producer. Julie is intently looking at Steele. He smiles assuming that she is attracted to him.

“I follow a strict regiment of nutritional supplements to keep this shape. My body is a temple to be worshipped. Feel my bicep,” preaches Steele. He flexes his arm like a schoolboy trying to impress a girl at the beach. Julie is unfazed and doesn’t reach for his arm.

“You’re much smaller than you look in the movies.” Steele’s jaw drops while Wolfe almost spits out his drink through his nose from laughing so hard.

“I’ve had enough! Take your little bimbo friend and get out of my sight! Go back your *producer* who is pretending that you have an ounce of brains and talent.” Steele waves his hand as if to dismiss them. Both girls immediately stand to leave.

“You’re heartless,” Julie says to Steele. “Come on we’re going,” Julie motions to April. April hesitates for a moment as if she’d like to stay with

Wolfe. But she reconsiders after seeing the look of anger on Julie's face. The two girls head back to their friend who welcomes them with open arms. He says something that makes them laugh. Wolfe watches the girls disappear into the crowd.

"What's wrong with you, Steele? Can't you play nice for five minutes? You can't even engage in a conversation without talking about yourself. No wonder you haven't meant anyone since Angela!"

"Don't bring up her name again! You don't know anything about me. You're lucky; you are the characters you play. When the camera stops rolling you don't stop acting. People love you because you're just like in the movies. You don't know what is like to constantly disappoint fans that thought you were stronger, bigger, better looking, more charming than in the movies. How would you like to always be beneath your fans expectations? People don't care what I'm really like so why should I care about them! I've had enough, I'm leaving."

"Hold on a second, we're not done here. I'm finally starting to figure you out." Wolfe grabs him by the sleeve.

"Hands off, drunk," Steele tries to push him off. He pushes Wolfe's arm off causing Wolfe to throw his drink behind him. It lands into the face of a very unhappy customer. The face of Blaze Vansome. He says nothing as he wipes the liquid off his face. Vansome looks behind him to his massive identical bodyguards.

"Look," Blaze motions to them. "Two old men that just made a huge mistake."

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

"What do we have here? Two has-been action stars. Imagine, fossil remains perfectly preserved."

"Good one," nods Crash.

Blaze wanders around Wolfe and Steele while talking to his bodyguards, "They were something in their day, let's emphasize the word 'WERE'. Now look at them," Blaze points at Wolfe, "One is a lush, he can't finish a scene if everyone on the set helped him." Then Blaze looks at Steele. "While the other one is such an asshole that no one would help him if he begged." Wolfe shakes his head.

"This is quite an honour. I haven't talked to you since my old military movie, *War Hero*. Are you still as good a stuntman as you were then? Oh wait, you never finished that movie!" Wolfe comments.

“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. But I succeeded in spite of you.”

“Looks like I’m not the only one who hates your guts,” Steele looks at Blaze as if he’s made a friend.

“That’s the only thing we have in common, Steele. You’re both losers, faded action stars who didn’t know when to quit. It’s time to pass the torch and let the men of the new generation take over,” growls Blaze.

“You can’t even touch my box office stats,” replies Steele.

“Really? My movies make the theatre instead of going straight to video,” Blaze jeers. “Now, I want some payback.”

“Relax! The spilled drink was an accident. Let me buy you a beer,” Steele says.

“Don’t bother, just leave the club now and I won’t humiliate you!” Wolfe steps towards Blaze causing the two bodyguards to tense their bodies.

“I’m not your dog, I don’t leave when you speak and I don’t sit when you bark,” Wolfe snarls.

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

“No, I’ve been saving it just for you.”

“I have something very special for you too.” Blaze takes off his jacket, ready to fight. Steele looks at Blaze.

“Do you really want to get hurt? We’re all got movies to make, do you need an injury?” Steele curls 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 relaxes. Blaze motions behind him to his two bodyguards. “Take care of these old men.”

The bodyguards walk over and stand in front of Wolfe and Steele. They are three to four inches taller and outweigh the action stars by considerable pounds. Steele looks up and speaks to Burn.

“You have a decision to make. You can leave now and enjoy your night. Or take a punch and it will be the last thing you ever remember.” Steele points at his chin. “Go ahead, the first one’s free.” Burn fires a haymaker punch and Steele goes sailing across the bar. He lands in a heap and shakes his head. “I don’t get it, intimidation always worked in my movies.”

Wolfe pulls him up. “Reality check, Steele. This ain’t no movie,” replies Wolfe.

“I told you we should have left,” Steele barks at Wolfe as they step back to back, each facing one of the bodyguards.

“Think of all the fun you would have missed!” Wolfe ducks as Crash takes a swing.

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

“They’re identical twins!” Steele tries to avoid Burn who grabs him by the shoulders and tosses him across the bar onto a table. “I’m not having fun,” he yells.

“Fun? This monster just spilled my drink!” Wolfe is tossed into the bar. He gets up mad and thinks how to retaliate.

“I’ve had enough.” He marches towards Crash. “I may not be young and fast,” he leans down, “but I’m experienced and dirty.” He punches Crash right into the groin. Crash’s eyes open wide and he tips over onto the floor, writhing in pain.

“Wow, that was a fine example of sportsmanship,” Steele yells two tables over.

“But I got my man down,” Wolfe says

“You just wait,” Steele points at Burn. “Hey ugly! Are you coming to get me or do I have to wait all day?”

Burn races to Steele who runs towards a dance pole. As he is about to run by it, he grabs the pole, spinning around Burn as he tries to overtake him. Steele’s kicks his feet into the wrestler’s back using his momentum to shove Burn forward into one of the cages. Steele jams the door with a chair. Burn shakes the cage door like a wild animal that is unable to break free.

“Not bad, which movie is that from?” Wolfe asks.

“*Iron Fist*, but I was faster back then.”

“Of course.”

The crowd watching the fight begins to separate and several policemen enter the doorway. Blaze has watched the fight and is fuming. He looks at Wolfe and Steele.

“If you two touch me; I’ll have lawyers take everything you own.” He starts to back away. Steele and Wolfe look at each other.

“Are you thinking, what I’m thinking?” says Steele.

“You know I am,” answers Wolfe

“I’ll sue,” yells Blaze as he sees the two advance.

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

“I knew I should have left early,” whines Steele as another officer latches handcuffs on his wrists.

Hollywood Police Detachment *1 a.m.*

Both actors look grim sitting in a communal jail cell with several other troublemakers. Steele is sitting with his head in his hands looking very tired. Wolfe is leaning on the bars looking out into the other cells. Steele stands and leans his head on the top bunk and closes his eyes. He hears a voice from behind him.

“Don’t go to sleep, because I’m your worst nightmare,” whispers the voice. Steele, weary from his early fight, turns 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,” says the voice.

Steele looks down to see a tiny man no more than five feet tall of Indian decent. He shakes his head at Steele while he talks. The small Indian man might be hundred pounds sopping wet. The man’s face softens and smiles. He talks in a less threatening tone.

“You’re Steele Taylor, aren’t you?” he says in anticipation. “How was my acting?” The man puffs 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 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 stands in a very non-threatening stance but by the look of determination on his face he believes he is very powerful. Steele relaxes 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?”

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

The little Indian frowns. Wolfe stands behind the man and motions Steele to reconsider. Steele sees Wolfe’s gestures and then at looks back at the little man again. He changes his mind.

“I mean I don’t have the authority. But our agent will be by shortly and she’ll hook you up.” Steele awkwardly pats the man on the back. The man smiles.

“I’m going to be in an English movie,” he stammers to the other cell mates. “Praise my many gods for this fortunate moment of opportunity,” he gestures in comical martial moves while jabbering away. Wolfe comes up to Steele.

“Not bad, Steele, you managed to turn asshole mode off for a moment.”

“Leave me alone, 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.”

“Blaze is crazy! He’s not just a short trip, he’s a whole vacation.”

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

“We did,” they laugh. The door to the booking area opens and Toni enters accompanied by a police officer. The cell erupts with hoots and hollers as the other men yell their appreciation.

“Enough, you lowlifes, show some class,” yells Wolfe.

“Thanks a lot for waking me out of bed in the middle of the night,” Toni curses. She is fuming mad.

“Did we interrupt anything?” ask Wolfe.

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

“Listen Toni it was a mistake...” starts 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 points to Wolfe. “You better not have been drinking.” She pulls him closer by bringing her hands into the bars. Wolfe reeks of mints.

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

Steele interrupts, “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 sighs and shakes her head. She looks back at the policeman.

“Officer, it’s against my better judgement, but you can let the two of them out.” The officer opens the cell door as Toni motions 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 start to walk out; the little Indian man reaches through the bars towards Toni.

“Excuse me, my most attractive American woman,” he talks quickly in his Indian accent. “I would like a part in your movie. Mostly likely a fighting role,” he poses in fierce fighting stance that looks comical rather than menacing.

Toni looks back at Wolfe, “What did you promise this guy?”

“It wasn’t me; Steele said he could act in our movie.”

She looks at Steele with great surprise.

“I’ve never known Steele to recommend anyone to share the limelight, so you must be good. Here’s my card,” she hands it to him.

“Whenever you get out of here, give me a call.” She walks on.

The man grabs Steele as he passes. “Thanks, my most friendly American movie star. My friends call me Hamesh. I too will be out soon. 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 winks at Steele, “you give this most impressive Indian man a call.”

He hands Steele a business card, which he dumps it in his back pocket.

“I doubt that will happen,” Steele says under his breath and tries to catch up with the others. Steele looks back as the man smiles and waves.

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

“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 yells as the door to the precinct closes behind them.

Blaze’s mansion— Beverly Hills 1:30 a.m.

High in the foothills of Beverly Hills sits a large mansion surrounded by other beautiful homes. The house and grounds have an iron gate surrounding the perimeter with several expensive cars in the driveway. Two large Dobermans patrol around the fence. Blaze Vansome is extremely successful with all the trappings of success. He’s 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, you soon realize that he is scared to death of losing it all. He has no friends and harbours a bitter grudge against anyone who’s wronged him during his career. After this evening’s events, he’s remembered Wolfe is at the top of his list. He always believed Wolfe held him back at the start of his career. He’s used it to motivate himself to succeed ever since.

In the backyard, Blaze is sitting in a hot tub with two well-figured blonds. Crash and Burn are nursing their wounds at an outside bar with bags of ice on their respective injuries. Vansome is 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,” pleads Burn.

“That move Steele made on the pole was from that movie *Fist of something...*” Crash desperately tries to remember the movie.

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

Blaze screams, “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 say in unison.

“Now we have some matters to discuss,” he looks at the two girls with a sleazy grin. All of sudden Crash yells and jumps up from his bar stool.

“*Iron Fist!* That’s the movie he pulled that stunt in,” Crash nods his head as he remembers the movie.

“That’s it,” Burn nods in agreement. Then both men turn to face the cool icy stare of Blaze. They look mortified as they realize their mistake. Blaze stands 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 tries to persuade them to come back.

“Not you bimbos, those bimbos!” He points to the guys. The girls cannot be convinced to stay and rush off to change into their street clothes.

Vansome climbs out of the hot tub and puts on his robe. “Who cares, there’s always more where they came from,” he forgets the girls. Vansome turns his focus onto the bodyguard brothers.

“The two of you are going to help me put those old has-beens out of the action movies. Permanently!”

Both bodyguards look at each other and then back to Vansome.

“How? You want me to rub’em out?” laughs Crash. Blaze glares at him.

“Do you know what I like about you, Crash?” questions Blaze. Crash doesn’t respond immediately in case he angers Blaze more.

“No.”

Blaze scratches his chin as if to ponder the answer. “That’s funny, I can’t think of anything either.” He slaps Crash in the head. “Now shut up and leave the thinking to me. We’re going to hit them where it hurts most.”

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

“In the balls,” say 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 favor with someone who can.”

Crash makes a face. “Favors 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 Six

The Director

Iron Dog Gym— The Next Morning 7:30 a.m.

“Blocks, I hate blocks,” bellows Wolfe.

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

“Aww,” Wolfe screams. “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,” smirks Steele.

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

“If you say so,” Steele laughs and stacks another block.

“Ow, why are you doing this? Do you think I enjoy pain?” Wolfe yells.

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

“Enemy, who’s the enemy?” Wolfe looks around the room. The blocks are starting to waver.

“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?” Pang asks

“I feel pain, I hurt, I’m tired, and I’ve had enough!” Wolfe quits and drops all the blocks and they come tumbling down to the floor. One from above his head smacks him on the forehead. Wolfe gets an idea.

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

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

“The lesson is obvious, isn’t it?” He picks up the block and points it at them. Pang awaits his answer. “It’s P and P!”

“What are you talking about?” asks Steele.

“Pain and Pang, you can’t have one without the other.” Wolfe pauses, “Next time can we use nerf blocks?” Pang shakes his head.

“You are too caught up trying to belittle the process. Expand your mind; try to imagine how your life affects others. Now go, your movie director awaits.” The two actors grab their towels and file 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 jokes.

“Good, because tomorrow it’s your turn,” Pang adds. Steele’s smile vanishes and turns to say something to Pang as they exit out the door. Pang has vanished from the room.

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

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

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

Wolfe glares at Steele as an assistant picks them up in a golf cart to drive them to the nearby sound stage.

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

“Those ‘people’ were probably 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.”

“True, I’m honest about that. But you’re fooling yourself if you think you can quit cold turkey. Can’t you see that 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 looks ahead as the assistant parks the golf cart. The assistant points 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 looks over at Wolfe. “And how the hell do you quantify that? Am I supposed to bow and grovel before everyone I meet?” He bends down before Wolfe. “Oh great one, you are so wonderful. How may I serve you?” A crew member walks by and does a double take on the scene.

“What the hell do you want?” yells Steele. The crew member looks uncomfortable and moves on. Wolfe answers as Steele gets up.

“How about treating people like they’re human beings. You promise me that you won’t put anyone down. Maybe you’ll start to 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 stops Steele from walking and looks at him.

“You think you got the willpower to stop acting like poison with other human beings?” Wolfe questions.

“You sure you got the willpower to go without a drink and join reality with the rest of us?” returns Steele. They continue walking.

“I can definitely outlast you.”

“Care to stake your job on it?”

“What do you 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.”

“Yes. But it’s not going to happen. When I put my mind to something,” Steele taps his head, “there’s no way to break it. Besides you won’t last twenty-four hours without having a drink. I’ll have you off this picture before the second day of principal shooting.”

“You have yourself a deal,” replies Wolfe. They shake hands.

“Too bad this is the only day we’ll get to work with each other, since you’ll be sucking back Lysol 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. Remember?”

“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 used to your trailer, Steele. By the end of the day you will have insulted somebody and this whole picture will be mine.” Wolfe rubs his

hands in anticipation as they turn the corner to come face to face with Toni. She is standing with her arms folded and tapping her feet as she waits for the two of them to arrive.

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

“Toni, my love,” Wolfe puts his arm around her as they walk. “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 sniffs 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 smiles. “Wolfe’s right, Toni, after today, things are going to be much better around here.” He stares at Wolfe. Toni looks at the both of 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.”

“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 comments.

“The studio has been contacting a number of potential directors and have made their final choice. He just arrived yesterday having finished principal shooting of his last movie.”

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

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

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

“We’ll see,” whispers Wolfe.

Exasperated, Toni speaks, “No, Steele, it’s not Stephen. This director has a long list of popular movies.”

“Who is it?” questions Steele.

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

“Who is it?” questions Wolfe.

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

“Who?” starts Wolfe.

“Is It!?” asks Steele.

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

They have walked in the main set area and are approached by a very small, thin, flamboyant man named Sven Anders. He’s dressed in a powder pink

shirt with ruffles and is covered in jewellery. He has a yellow scarf tied around his neck not for the cold but as his fashion accessory. He rushes up to the men. He grabs Steele and kisses him on both cheeks. Steele's eyes are wide with shock and his mouth hangs open. Sven grabs Wolfe and holds his hand; Wolfe is frozen and can't speak.

"Oh, hi, Toni," Sven dismissively looks over to her; obviously women are not his thing.

"Well," Sven slaps his hands together in glee. "Are my two he-men ready to make the action movie of the century?" he says standing in a very feminine manner. Both men look to Toni to be rescued.

Action Movie Set *15 minutes later*

Steele and Wolfe have Toni cornered in a huddle. They are attempting to change her mind about her pick of a director. Sven is busy with stagehands and the second unit crew director organizing the day's events. Steele moans, "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? Look at him, Toni, he's...not actually a man's man," Wolfe shrugs.

"No, I think that's exactly the problem," Steele complains.

"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. He's got some terrific ideas of putting the whole lagging action movie genre on its ear. He's waited a long time for this opportunity."

"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 whines.

"Why do you think he's after you, I'm the one in better shape," Wolfe poses.

"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 stands up and yells.

They both look down to the floor. Steele looks up first.

“Man, are you sad!” Steele jeers at Wolfe.

Wolfe tries to throw a punch at Steele but Toni intervenes. “Enough! 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 you work with in the first minute you meet them. If you hate Sven so much why haven’t said one rude thing to him?” Toni inquires.

Steele composes himself. “I’m practicing some,” he looks at Wolfe, “restraint for the sake of the picture.”

Wolfe laughs. Toni looks at 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 sashays up to the two men.

“How are my two favourite action boys doing?”

“Great, Sven. What’s our first scene?” says Steele.

Sven claps his hands once. “Always ready to jump in, you’re a real trooper, Steele.”

Sven slaps him in the ass. “Nash set the two of them up for the next scene.”

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

“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 him for dear life. Any questions?”

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

“Nothing, remember I have all safety concerns looked after. But in the movie he’s your friend 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 says.

“Let’s get going people!” yells Sven.

“We’re ready here!” Nash yells.

“This is a dress rehearsal before we put this to tape.” Sven calls out to the crew. A stagehand comes out and snaps an electronic clicker for the take.

“And action,” motions Sven.

Steele picks up an iron chain attached to a large submarine door. The wind machine is blowing and a mist of water is sprayed on their faces to simulate the ocean. Steele is straining on the chain, which will open the sub door before it sinks below the ocean. Wolfe jumps onto the sub platform and

gingerly grabs Steele around the stomach. He gently pulls Steele to unstick the door. Sven stands up.

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

Steele explodes. “Going through the motions! I’d like you to act this scene, you son of...” Wolfe starts to point at Steele, as he is about to insult Sven. Steele recovers 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 takes a deep breathe and saves 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 jumps out of his fluffy director’s chair and approaches the two actors. “Wolfe, you’re pulling too weakly. Grab Steele like you mean it! Here let me show you.”

Sven grabs Steele from behind until his arms are tight and Sven’s groin is tight behind Steele’s butt. Steele is horrified but is afraid to move or say anything that could be construed as an insult.

“Steele, you need to look like you feeling terror, I want you to look really scared, as if your life’s in danger.” Steele’s face is a horrified mask for all the crew to see. Steele’s homophobic fear is putting on a stellar performance. Sven looks at Steele’s face and smiles.

“That’s perfect, Steele. Am I a great director or what? Places everyone for the next take.”

Steele remains horrified and frozen to the spot.

“Is he a great director or what?” Wolfe smirks.

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

Up above the set is a catwalk for the electrical, lighting and cabling. A door opens from a set of stairs and a blond man with spiked hair enters the corridor. He is dressed in coveralls with the name ‘OZ’ embroidered on the front. He carries a small briefcase and heads down the catwalk to above the main stage. He walks with a confident step. His demeanour is calm but he doesn’t seem to belong here. He stops at the cable junction, which houses all of the cables for the wirework scenes. He removes a wire cutter from the briefcase and places the blade over the apex of the cables. Carefully and quietly, two of the three primary cables are cut. He places the wire cutters back into the briefcase.

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

Action Movie Set *late afternoon*

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

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

Suddenly, someone emerges from the smoke in front of Steele. Sunglasses cover his cold eyes and he chews a toothpick in his mouth. Muscles bulge out of his army fatigues and there is a harness across his chest with the outline of grenades. His gun is a Brass Eagle rifle with autoloading magazine and sight. The rifle is turned and aimed squarely at Steele’s chest. The cable assistant steps back with fear.

“Only one of us can work on this movie. Goodbye, Steele.”

Wolfe aims and fires the bullet into his chest. A crimson glob wells up on his shirt and drips down. Steele touches his chest in disbelief.

“You shot me!” The blood drains from his face; he feels his life ebbing away from his body. “Why?” he stammers.

“A thousand and one reasons, Steele, but I only need one to pull the trigger,” laughs Wolfe. He holds a canister of small red balls and opens the gun barrel. “Aren’t these paint ball guns great, the vegetable oil dye washes right off. I’ve been dying to use one of these for ages.”

The cable assistant sighs with relief that the gun isn’t real. Nash walks up and shakes his head.

“Wolfe, stop making a mess with the paintball guns, that’s for later scenes. Can someone give Steele a clean shirt?” Nash looks and points to one of his staff.

Steele is furious.

“I gotcha didn’t I? You thought I was trying to kill you. Did you want to change your underwear?” smirks Wolfe. Steele composes himself.

“Fooled me? Not a chance! 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 walks on stage and stands next to Steele.

“Are you all right there, big fellow?”

Steele looks nervously behind him. “Let’s do it ahhh...little fellow.”

Sven slaps him on the ass “That’s my Steele,” and walks back to the director’s chair.

“Wait a minute, the cables need to be tightened up,” yells Nash.

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

Nash adjusts the cable network taking some slack out of the lines so they are taut and ready for the stunt.

“We’re ready,” says Nash

“Rolling.” The clicker snaps on the stage.

“Action,” yells Sven.

Two thugs charge into the set. It is mocked after a nuclear plant operations center with large computer consoles and tanks with hydraulic piping. They move around cautiously, searching for the action star. Steele stands on a platform above them, looking down. They see him and pull out their guns, taking aim. Steele runs along the platform as they start to fire. Compressed air shoots out clumps of dust and sparks, with fire trailing just behind Steele’s feet. Steele charges and completes a leap over the heads of both men.

Crack! The only cable holding Steele splinters causing a twisting and crashing motion that takes his leaping momentum and careens him high against the wall like a bungee cord snaps him straight into the air.

The actors are frozen in place and Nash is too far to act. Only one person is close enough to help. Wolfe dashes towards the falling Steele.

“I got you!” yells Wolfe. Wolfe dives through the air and lands under Steele as he falls to the ground.

“Get out the way!” Steele yells.

Thud!

Steele lands on Wolfe in a tangled heap. Wolfe is padded with his fatigues gear for the next scene and succeeds as a landing cushion with mixed results. Everyone rushes towards them. Nash is first to reach them.

“Steele, Wolfe! Talk to me, are you two all right?”

Steele rolls over without saying anything. Wolfe shakes his head, while he rises and stands up heroically.

“No need to thank me,” Wolfe looks 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 runs beside them. “Nash, how could this happen! These stunts have to safe, what the hell caused the cable to snap?” Sven yells.

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

“Get some answers now!” Nash leaves to go up the catwalk.

“Get the medic over here,” barks Sven.

Steele tries to rise.

“Do you hurt, Steele?” asks Wolfe.

“Only when I breathe,” he groans and picks himself up.

Steele winces as he tries to put weight on his left arm.

“My arm feels like it’s broken. I’m in incredible pain. And I can’t blame anyone because of our stupid bet.” Steele grits his teeth as he looks at Wolfe.

“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,” replies Wolfe. 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 opens and the crew’s attention shifts from Steele to a beautiful woman in a tight jumpsuit. She steps through the door oblivious to the accident that has just occurred. Despite the commotion of the near fatal accident, the entire set quiets down at her arrival. She is a tall, dark raven-haired beauty with a body that makes men’s jaws drop.

She is “Madison Jones,” better known as the *Frigid Fortress*, lead action heroine of over ten martial arts films. She’s confident and will drop you on your butt if you don’t treat her like a professional. She strides by the crew as they stare. She has a hot temper and has no problem telling her peers when they are wrong. She’s in her acting prime and has very successful box office results. Self taught by a number of different martial art disciples while

growing up in Japan, she can match any male counterparts, blow for blow. She is a no nonsense action heroine and since she doesn't live in Los Angeles, she doesn't get caught to Hollywood trappings. Sven walks up to her and grabs her arm.

"Sorry, my dear, this is not a good time. There's been an accident. Let's go back to your dressing room," Sven directs her to the back of the set. They start to walk 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 purses her lips as she talks.

"Co-star?" Steele and Wolfe look at each other in a bewildered daze.

Chapter Seven

A Woman's Perspective

Wolfe is running for his life.

He finds the entrance, a large jagged hole surrounded by thorny plants. He looks into the mouth of the cave and plunges into the darkness. His hands feel the smooth water eroded rock walls. Something runs across his hand. He ignites a match and its light illuminates a large hairy night crawler as it disappears into the rocks. He proceeds downwards into the depths of the dark until a soft glow shines in the distance and guides his quest. He stumbles through the cobwebs into the heart of the cavern. He has entered the treasure chamber.

His heart leaps 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 who's hardness surpasses the strength of diamonds. The gems shine brightly at the far end of the chamber, shimmering in the sparkling green stream. He bends down, watching and admiring their lustre. He reaches for his pouch and scoops the precious gems into his leather bag causing the water to ripple and distort.

So beautiful, he thought but costly, so many of his team 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 leaps forward; his breathe smelling of rotten teeth and his body covered with ceremonial tattoos of an African tribe. The native has incredible strength and slowly chokes Wolfe's throat. Before oblivion could take over, Wolfe rolls the native and himself into the stream, trying to pull his head under the water. They thrash deeper and deeper into the

water until the two of them get caught up the current. The stream undertow pulls them under, down deep below until the current's crushing weight pushes against their bones. Just as he feels his lungs are going to explode, the water rushes out of a rock opening spewing them onto the bank. Wolfe turns to face his attacker only to find the native skewered by his own spear.

His footprints imprint into the soft sandy shore as the river trickles down the bank. The land around the river is open with lush jungle foliage behind him. He wipes sweat from his forehead as he rounds the corner and trips over a bony hand sticking up from the bank. He crashes to the ground landing in the silt; he shakes his head and wipes his mouth, spiting up bile. He stares into the bony abyss of well-devoured skull head. Chains shackle the arms and legs of the former man pegged down to the riverbank. Drowning perhaps, but the bones appear so white as if bleached and picked clean of meat. A flying spear interrupts his thoughts, landing inches from his leg. A native with a ring through his nose and tattooed face comes leaping out of the bushes tackling Wolfe to the ground. He presses his feet into the native's chest and sends him flying over his head into the river. Immediately, a large flurry of activity appears in the water and the native screams as hungry piranhas feed on his poor body. He struggles 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," muses Wolfe.

From behind him, several other natives rush from the foliage onto the sandy shore. Wolfe spies a possible crossing further down the river and makes a dash towards it. He runs toward a large fallen tree that crosses the river to the other side. The log suspends well above the water's grasp, easily ten feet below. He begins to carefully walk across the narrow branch, taking care not to fall in the water. The natives rush behind him and one native begins to cross slowly behind Wolfe. He throws a dagger that strikes just below Wolfe's foot. Wolfe stops and stoops tentatively to pull the knife from the wood. Wolfe shakes his finger at the native.

"Now I have the knife."

Wolfe feels in control and smiles his confidence back at the native. He smiles back and looks beyond Wolfe. Wolfe looks behind him and frowns when he sees a party of natives advancing from the other side of the river's tree branch. He's trapped with only the hungry piranhas to jump to below him. The natives slowly advance, one brings out a blowpipe and loads what looks like an evil looking pin into the reed. Wolfe pulls a rope from his side pocket and pulls one end around the bottom of the branch and quickly knots

it off, turning it into a rope handle. He watches the two natives advance, the second native pulls another dagger from his belt and readies to throw at Wolfe's torso. The other native puts the reed to his mouth to blow the dart. Wolfe watches both sides, waiting for the best moment to react. Neither native can clearly see the other and prepare their simultaneously attacks.

The native throws his knife. The other native blows into his reed. Both the dart and dagger sail through the air bringing death ever closer to their target. Wolfe waits and then kicks off his right foot to jump into the water. As Wolfe hangs 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 finds a home in the neck of the other native who gurgles a groan of surprise. Wolfe comes face to face with the water but with the momentum he is able to swing 360 degrees around the log. He has trouble regaining his footing back on top and falls groin first to the log in pain. Wolfe's impact on the log sends 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 look at each other and then advance slowly on the prone Wolfe, who continues to straddle the log. A dull rumbling can be heard.

Wolfe pulls a leather pouch from his bag and hangs it over the log; as if the treasure it holds will be lost to all of them if he drops it. The natives hesitate as if wary of attacking Wolfe. One native steps up to the river, spearing a wriggling piranha and throws it at Wolfe. It narrowly misses him and falls back into the river. Several other natives stand by the river with spears ready to secure the bag that Wolfe may throw in. The other natives begin advancing on Wolfe on the log. Wolfe lets go of the rope preparing to fight. The native on the right points his spear at Wolfe's chest; Wolfe motions him forward in his last stand. The native jumps on the log causing Wolfe to fall towards the river.

Wolfe closes his eyes in anticipation of the piranha's sharp teeth; instead he lands on the deck of a Zodiac. The pilot's head faces forward behind the plastic wind deck, which blocks him from the natives' spears. Several spears are thrown which Wolfe evades as they land in the wooden floor of the boat. Several natives continue their attack from the shore towards the speeding Zodiac. The first one tries to land in the boat and misses, falling into the waiting mouths of the piranhas. The second lands on the deck and faces Wolfe. He raises his spear to skewer Wolfe. Wolfe raises his feet and kicks the native squarely in the chest sending him into the river and to his death.

Suddenly, two natives drop down from the trees to land onto the zodiac deck. One advances towards Wolfe while the other turns to attack the pilot. The pilot steers towards some branches on the shore that connect in the native's chest as he turns to face the pilot. His eyes bulge with surprise as the branches carry him to the river's death. The other native turns his evil tattooed face towards Wolfe. He leaps, pinning Wolfe to the Zodiac's floor. The native pushes the heel of his hand against Wolfe's face pressing it towards the river. A school of piranha aggressively pursue the boat. Wolfe's face comes to face with a piranha's hungry mouth. Wolfe shifts his weight, using the native's forward motion to send him into the river. The native's lower body drags behind the boat while his arms continue to grab at Wolfe, trying to pull him in. The piranhas devour at his legs as the native's face grimaces. A blood trail follows the boat and the native tries a last minute fit of strength to pull Wolfe into the water. Wolfe head butts him causing the native to lose his grip. A blood pool emerges as his arm and then his hand descend into the writhing pool.

"From now on I only eat beef." Wolfe looks at the mass of blood floating in the river. He stands onto the floor of the boat and sighs with relief. He looks at the pilot who eases the throttle down to slow the boat's speed.

"Charlie, you did it again! Your timing is amazing. My butt almost became the main course back there."

Charlie turns around pulling her cap off. Long dark hair cascades behind her back as she shakes her head. "I'd hate to see anything happen to that butt of yours." She walks over to him and they embrace in a long deep kiss. Wolfe drops his arms and Charlie turns and grabs some tools under the deck.

"Did you get the treasure?" she asks.

"You know I did, my dear. When we get back to civilization, you and I are going to live like Kings. He unrolls a small pouch to reveal a handful of brightly coloured precious stones.

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

Suddenly, from beneath the water, the last native tries a final grab. A bloody, fleshy hand juts out of the water and grasps Wolfe's leg.

"Charlie!" Wolfe gasps. Charlie turns with an axe and chops the hand at the wrist. The rest of the body sinks beneath the boat. Wolfe runs his hand over his leg.

"Thanks for the hand!" he yells and tosses in into the water behind the boat.

"Some guys just don't know when to die," Wolfe laughs.

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

“Cut and Wrap! Wolfe, you were terrific, some of the best work you’ve ever done!” exclaims Sven.

The movie set explodes into a frenzy of activity. The boat is in a pool with fake palms trees and bushes with a large green screen behind it to fill in the background movie magic. The half-eaten native emerges from the water and slaps Wolfe on the back.

“Next time, I’ll get you,” the actor jokes.

“In your dreams, Phil,” laughs Wolfe and gives him a high five.

Sitting next to Sven in a director’s chair is Steele stretching his arm in some discomfort. Wolfe walks 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 gets Best Supporting Actor,” Steele replies sarcastically. Wolfe hits Steele in the shoulder.

“How’s the broken limb holding up?” Steele winces in pain.

“How many times do I have to tell to 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. I wouldn’t be in this mess if you hadn’t tried 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? It wouldn’t surprise me if 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,” as Wolfe taps Steele’s stomach, “and be lean and mean like I am.” Steele punches Wolfe with his hurt arm and causes more pain for himself. Madison watches their exchange and shouts across the set.

“If the two of you spent half as much time prepping your lines as you did bickering; you might actually improve your acting,” she chides.

“And the frigid fortress is such a fine actress herself,” Steele whispers sarcastically to Wolfe. Madison can’t hear Steele’s comments but has a good idea that they were about her.

“Do you have something to say, Steele? I keep hearing how you’re such a rude, arrogant prick but you chicken out every time you talk to me. Do I scare you?” She walks up to him taps his chest with her finger.

“In your dreams. You don’t want to hear what I think of you.” Steele looks ready to say more, but catches himself as Wolfe smirks. Steele composes himself but his urge is so strong to criticize that his face becomes flushed and strained.

Madison dismisses him with her hand. “Don’t cry, Steele, I’ve intimidated a lot bigger men than you. Whenever you find your balls and have something to say to me. I’m right here,” replies Madison. She looks over at Wolfe. “Are you going to disappoint me as well? You want to go tie one on tonight at the Fight Club? I feel like drinking my face off. What do you say?”

Drinking your face off might be an improvement, Steele thinks to himself.

Wolfe looks sheepish, remembering his no alcohol bet. Suddenly he gets an idea and perks up.

“Madison, we’d love to go out with you tonight!” He puts his arm around Steele who is surprised by Wolfe’s reaction. “See ya around ten?” Madison does a doubletake on the two actors.

“For two guys who seem to hate each other, you look pretty chummy all of a sudden.” Wolfe gives Steele a hug. Steele tries to escape his embrace.

“Ten it is. Don’t stand me up or I’ll pick some other guys to take your place.”

Pick up some lesbians is what you mean, Steele thinks. Madison walks offstage towards the change rooms. Steele pushes Wolfe’s arm off of him and winces 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 have share this picture with Jones? You’re not telling me that you’re attracted to her?”

“When we were embracing, I wasn’t acting.”

“You’re pathetic, you can have all kinds of women. Why waste your time with that loudmouth?”

Wolfe grins, “I like the challenge of the hunt.”

Steele shrugs his shoulders and looks offstage where Madison has vanished.

“She’s got a real mouth on her.”

“She doesn’t hold back either. She’ll tell you off if you so much as look at her the wrong way,” Wolfe looks back at Steele. “The two of you are a pair made in heaven.”

"I wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole. She's obviously doesn't like men."

"Don't believe all the rumours. After all, people thought you were an arrogant prick and actually you're...well, never mind. Besides, I need you tonight! I can't drink so you have to cover for me or she'll suspect something."

"What? I'm not your babysitter. 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, and you'll get rid of me for good."

"It is 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," adds Steele.

"She doesn't care what you drink. I'll order something that looks similar and we'll switch drinks when she isn't looking. 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 thinks and rubs his chin. "I'll do it. Especially if it means I might get rid of you for good!"

"That's the spirit, you can be by my side every moment."

"I'm touched, Wolfe, but I'm not that kind of guy. I always thought the British secret agents you play were a bit feminine."

"You won't make an entire evening without insulting someone."

"We'll see about that!" replies Steele.

"Gentleman!"

Both turn to see Pang in a bright komodo robe standing next to the wall. He is 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 grasps 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 replies.

"It only hurts if it's true."

"Oh, God, this guy is a living, breathing fortune cookie. Are we supposed to meet with you?" asks Steele.

"In a manner of speaking. Are you going anywhere tonight?"

"Yes. We 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 Pang.

“Preparations, what are you talking about...”

Wolfe looks puzzled and starts to speak but Steele beats him to the point.

“Are we supposed to be doing something with you tonight?”

“Not with me, for me.”

“Sorry, Pang, but we’ve made plans; do some partying and maybe...get lucky.” Wolfe elbows Pang whose face remains 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 motions the two of them toward the hallway behind the set.

Steele is concerned. “What does he have planned for us now?”

They walk around a corner heading to one of the wardrobe rooms. Steele looks at Pang’s bright outfit.

“You know, Pang, that robe you’re wearing is pretty colourful. 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 makes us whole. Balancing this ability develops our inner self.” Pang looks back at Steele. “Are you concerned about your reputation?”

“Hell no. Nobody’s opinion is going change my mind about me.”

“Good. You will be well suited for tonight’s test.”

Steele looks confused and faces Wolfe. “What does he mean?”

They emerge at a sunken living room with two leather couches. On each couch are a wardrobe of clothes and shoes. Female clothes and shoes. Both actors look around the room for women.

“All right Pang! You got us a couple of dates. I told you he liked us.” Wolfe says to Steele who also perks up.

“Where are the lucky ladies, Pang? Are they going to dress in front of us? Oh yeah!” He slaps hands with Wolfe.

Pang remains impassive. “You may dress wherever you like.”

Both men remain motionless. Steele’s jaw drops.

“I’m already dressed, Pang, thanks,” Wolfe comments.

“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? I’ve put up with enough of your...”

Steele's voice trails off as he realizes he is about lose his bet and insult Pang. He trembles as he tries to bring his temper under control. Pang notices the silence.

"You are making progress, you are learning the value of other people's opinions."

"It is a little more complicated than that," Wolfe comments.

"Nonetheless, progress is being made. Now the two of you may dress and then I will explain tonight's task."

Steele is too infuriated to say anything and stutters, "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 up until now but this is silly and humiliating. What can this prove to you?" Wolfe asks.

"I decide what it proves and you will do as I ask or be contractually removed from the picture." He unrolls the contract they signed with Toni. "I will not ask a second time."

"Toni's going to hear about this!" Steele pounds his fist onto a table and then walks over to the clothes laid out. He handles the colourful long dress and looks at a bra with enhancements inserted into the fabric. He looks up at Wolfe.

"He's got us for now, let's get this over with." Steele starts to undress down to his boxer shorts. Wolfe walks over to his clothes.

"This can't take too long, Pang, we're meeting Madison tonight at the Fight Club."

"Then that is where you shall meet her."

"Do always talk in riddles, Pang?" Steele grumbles as he pulls the dress over his boxers.

"Don't try to figure Pang out, he is an enigma wrapped in a riddle by some guy who smokes weed." Wolfe holds 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 sits in a yoga position on the couch opposite them.

Wolfe struggles getting his bra on, "I'm used to trying to take things off that but I don't have any practice putting them on."

Steele walks up to Wolfe. "Do you need some help?" Steele pretends to gesture towards the bra.

"Thanks, but I'll try this on my own," Wolfe looks down at Steele's dress. "Nice panty line," pointing at Steele's boxers showing through the dress.

"If you think I'm putting on female panties," Steele points at Pang.

“That is not necessary for the task at hand.”

“Well, spit it out! What is this magical task that we have to wear women’s clothes to complete,” Steele says through clenched teeth.

Both look towards Pang while putting on their own women’s clothes and wigs. He stands up and walks 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 shakes his head and laughs. Steele finishes dressing and turns to look into the mirror. He twists his head to the side as if squinting his eyes will make him look more attractive.

“You are one ugly woman!” Wolfe sees Steele in the mirror.

“You are both ugly women,” Mr. Pang comments.

“Thanks, Pang, you are a master of motivation,” chides Steele.

“Your appearance will make tonight’s task that much more of a challenge.”

“But,” Wolfe starts.

“Ladies, come in, you are needed,” Pang commands and claps his hands twice. Two petite Asian women enter from the side door with makeup kits.

“Wow, we are going to get some dates after all...” Wolfe begins to say.

“Please sit down, both of you,” Pang motions the men to the chairs in front of the mirror. The women giggle and shake their heads but do not speak. Pang nods at the two females. “Please, do what you can with them.”

The girls spread out their tools and begin applying various products.

After several minutes, Steele coughs from too much dust applied to his face and gets 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,” chimes in Wolfe. Pang slowly paces around the room, showing not a hint of concern.

“Very well, your patience has been duly noted. Tonight’s objective is about thinking beyond your needs and helping out someone you have never met.”

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 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!”

“Right, sorry.”

“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,” Pang motions to the two women, “help to make you look...” he stares at the two men, “somewhat feminine...”

Chapter Eight

Face Off

The Fight Club—North Hollywood 9 *p.m.*

The Fight Club is the ultimate brawler bar. Spotlights on the roof of the club flash up the smog filled sky. A pack of Harley Davidson's drive into the club's parking lot. One of the bikers and his woman get off his hog and enter the club. Above the front entrance hangs a huge lit billboard with a list of the evening's fights. Inside the doors and past the bouncers, is a large boxing ring surrounded with strategically placed chairs and couches. On the second level are 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. They 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 cheer the winners. No weapons are allowed, only bare fists during a four-minute time limit. The fight is fast as each brawler goes all out during the time period. A match is about to begin.

The large biker enters the ring and readies himself for the fight. His supporters cheer him on with loud hoots and hollers as his grease filled hands pulls his leather jacket off. He removes his sunglasses to show two cold dark eyes void of compassion. He wipes the corner of his mouth to reveal broken teeth, a dentist's wet dream of repair. The biker smiles as his opponent steps into the ring.

A skinny teenager in a white karate robe stands alone in the corner. He has no entourage except another pimply young friend in baggy jeans and sweatshirt. The young fighter paces back and forth nervously in his corner, unsure of his choice to fight. His friend tries to persuade him to leave and points to the door several times to explain he still has a chance to leave. The kid looks at the door and then looks at his opponent. When he looks back at

his friend, a look of fear is frozen on his face. The biker looks at him and laughs; some of his friends begin yelling obscenities and throwing objects at the boy making him duck and stumble around the ring. The biker's friends laugh and continue to mock the boy. He starts to step between the ropes to leave the ring when the lights go low and two spotlights illuminate the center of the ring. The teenager nervously steps back into the ring to face the biker. His friend looks hopelessly on, shaking his head. An announcer's voice crackles 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 erupts in spontaneous applause.

"The rules are simple—any foreign objects mean automatic disqualification. First man to fall down, removed from the ring or 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 pauses to work up the crowd's anticipation before sayings, "Let's get ready to.....FIGHT!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

The crowd screams itself hoarse as a beautiful ring attendant walks around the ring with a sign with the words FIGHT emblazed in neon letters glowing in the dark. The young boy remains frozen in his corner, unsure of his first move. The biker laughs and swaggers slowly to him.

"Come on, kid, I promise to make this quick." The boy turns the opposite way as if to leave the ring. The biker reaches out to grab the boy.

The boy's head turns back towards the biker and he smiles. He spins his body towards the biker 360 degrees into a spinning back kick, which catches the biker squarely in the jaw. The biker eyes grow large and then roll into the back of his head. Blood flies out of his mouth and his body goes limp and he spins around and crumples into the mat face first. He is instantly unconscious. The young boy struts around the ring, performs a few complicated martial art kicks for the crowd's applause and then flips the bird at the bikers, causing them to scream with rage.

"They fall for that at least once a month; you think those out of town bikers would stop believing that weak kid routine," Steele comments. He and Wolfe are at a corner of the bar trying to appear inconspicuous. Steele is wearing a blue outfit with a curly black wig on his head. Wolfe is dressed as a blonde wearing a black two-piece ensemble with matching pearl necklace and earrings. Pang's makeup girls have 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 stirs a very feminine drink with an umbrella.

“I remember that movie, you weren’t too bad before you started drinking,” Steele remarks.

“Watch it, that was almost a compliment! I wouldn’t want you to fall into any bad habits.”

“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.”

“We could make up a story and each confirm it with Pang tomorrow?”

“Don’t forget, he said that he’d have ‘spies’ watching us to make sure we followed through.”

“He was serious about that?” The two of them scan the room in unison.

“I wouldn’t put anything by that little guy.” Steele looks at Wolfe.

“Pang’s makeup girls should have spent more time on you. You still have a butchy look.”

“You should talk, a guy’s going to have to be pretty desperate to come near you.” Wolfe brushes some fuzzies off his clothes. “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. I can even look good as a woman.”

”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. Is that Madison over there?” Steele points across the bar.

“Where?” Wolfe ducks down.

“Made you look!” Wolfe punches Steele in a very ungirl like move.

“We have to get this done quickly before Madison arrives. I wonder which bathroom I’ll change in?”

“Will you cool your heels about Madison; she’s not interested.”

“Steele, did you ever notice that you talk about her as much as I do?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You like her as much as I do!”

“Get real, she’s rude, arrogant and always putting others down. Including us.”

“Sounds like your equal.”

“I’m not interested. She all yours, like you have a chance.”

“It’s okay for a man to dream.” Wolfe swishes his non-alcoholic drink around. He gets more enjoyment playing with his cocktail than drinking it. Steele gets up from his table and adjusts his dress.

“These margaritas go straight through me. How do women drink these things?” He pushes his empty drink away.

“You should try to drink non-alcoholic ones, they make you want to puke.” He wipes his mouth.

“I’ll be right back, I gotta use the sandbox.”

Steele walks away.

“Hey, don’t forget to use the right washroom,” yells Wolfe but his words are lost in the drone of the crowd. Steele walks to the back of club. The women’s washroom is on the right. Without considering his attire he turns left into the male washroom and steps up to a urinal. There are separators between each urinal; as Steele eases in to relieve himself, an older man looks up at Steele and sees a big ugly woman. His eyes raise in confusion. Steele looks over and nods, while the man continues to stare. Steele looks ahead on the wall mirror and realizes the man’s confusion. He makes up a story to cover his mistake.

“I’m a hermaphrodite, half woman,” cups his hands under his fake breasts, “half man,” points his head down to his waist.

The other man nods his head and slowly stumbles away doing up his pants and running out the door. Steele shakes his head.

“I hate people who don’t wash their hands.”

Steele emerges from the male washroom after washing his hands and walks down the corridor. He runs right into a sobbing teenage girl with red punk hair. She tries to get around him and into the women’s washroom. They sidestep right and then left each blocking the other. The girl pounds on Steele’s chest in frustration.

“Get out of my way, you stupid bitch!” as she shoves by him. Steele doesn’t like anyone pushing him and decides to pursue to tell her off.

“Hands off, kid,” he yells through the closed door. He checks his clothes.

“I can’t believe she bought that I was a woman,” Steele remarks as he follows her into the woman’s washroom.

“Welcome to the Fight Club, Mr. Vansome!” The bouncer welcomes Blaze and his bodyguards as he escorts them past the crowd and through the main entrance. Blaze surveys the interior of the club and looks back at Crash and Burn.

“The two of you spread out and find those ‘stars.’ They have to be here, I called their limo service and they were dropped off here a half an hour ago. Find them and make sure they have an unfortunate accident that puts them out of their movie for good!”

“But, Blaze, I though you called in a favor to have that taken care of?” asks Burn.

Blaze slaps 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, I’ll make sure their injuries put them out of commission for a long time,” threatens 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.”

“Who cares? Your films always take in more money than the both of them combined,” questions Crash.

Vansome smiles at his own success. “Two reasons. I hate Wolfe and there’s some buzz about the two of them combining talents. It could resurrect their careers. I’m the only true action hero. I want you to find them and make sure they feel pain!”

Wolfe sits at his booth stirring his virgin drink with an umbrella stir stick. *I wonder if I had one drink would Steele notice? he thinks. One drink, what harm can it do? It’s not like I can’t stop? I can’t believe I’ve held out this long. As bad as Steele is to work with, he’s been a good motivator to stop drinking. I can’t lose this movie; it’s my last chance. But would one drink be a problem?*

Wolfe signals the bartender.

“Rum and Coke, buddy.” He looks back at the bathroom “...and make it quick!”

Sitting next to Wolfe is a young kid, probably barely over the drinking age, slouched over the counter looking depressed or drunk or both. Wolfe sits at the bar stool waiting for his drink. The kid looks up, gives Wolfe a puzzled look and then his eyes sparkle as he figures who’s next to him.

“Dude, you’re Wolfe Neilson, I’ve seen all your movies! You’re like my favourite action star.” Wolfe puts his forefinger to his lips to signify to quiet down. The boy then realizes the makeup and female clothes. “But, dude, why are you wearing a dress?” he whispers.

Wolfe smiles and whispers back, “I’d appreciate you keeping this quiet. It’s a long story, nice to meet you...”

“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 raises his glass to take another swig of his drink. He’s pretty much in the bag.

“George, that’s the movies. I’m not as wild in person.”

George hits 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 made movies. You live your character man, you gotta respect that. You’re the ultimate drinking man!” George pauses and looks at Wolfe, “when you not wearing a dress.”

Steele closes the door to the women’s bathroom. *This is a new experience*, he thinks.

“Hey, kid!” he hears her weeping from a stall. “What’s your problem?” Steele pounds on the stall door. “Are you okay?” A tough biker chick comes out of the stall and looks at Steele. She shakes her head at him.

“You’re got your own problems to deal with, girlfriend.” She turns and walks off. Steele watches her leave.

“I thought you were someone else.” He notices that she goes straight out the door.

“Doesn’t anyone wash their hands around here?”

Steele turns around and sees the punk girl at the sink washing her hands and face.

She looks at him with disgust. “What the hell do you want?”

Steele hears the attitude in her voice and reconsiders. “Never mind,” he dismisses her with his hand and starts to leave. “You came in here crying, I thought you were in trouble. You obviously don’t want any help.” Steele turns around to the door.

“Leave me alone! Unless you are an expert on selfish boyfriends, you couldn’t possibly help me.” Steele stops from exiting the door and heads back into the washroom. He looks at himself in the mirror and then looks back at the punk girl.

“You’d be surprised by what I know.”

The girl can't keep up her tough-girl front and begins to cry again. Her face is covered with streaming tears, causing her make-up to run.

"He can be so sweet sometimes, but other times he is a real prick and treats me like trash."

Steele thinks of his own relationships. "Guys can be real jerks."

"Have you had a boyfriend like that?"

"I've been that boyfriend."

"Huh?" She tilts her head sideways and looks closer at Steele as if she is ready to discover his secret.

Steele recovers. "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?"

"Most of the time I don't think I knew I was doing it."

"You know a lot. I want you to meet my boyfriend!"

"What?" Steele exclaims as the punk girl drags him out of the washroom.

Back to the bar, George is looking sick.

"I don't feel so good," George sighs and lowers his head to the bar.

"I know that feeling," remarks Wolfe. He pushes his untouched rum and coke drink down the counter and continues drinking his non-alcoholic one.

"Hey, kid, sleep at home and make room for the paying consumers," barks the bartender.

"This paying customer wants him to stay," Wolfe slips a twenty on the bar, which the bartender greedily grabs.

"Whatever, just make sure he doesn't get sick or I'll have a bouncer kick him out." The bartender grabs a drink for another customer. George raises 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."

"I'm the opposite of queer, George. Trust me. I'm dressed like this because I lost a bet. Can we leave it at that?"

"No problemo, man."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three next month."

"How long have you been drinking?"

"Since I was thirteen."

"You're like me growing up. Got any parents?" Wolfe asks.

“Just my mom, Dad screwed off when I was a kid, couldn’t handle the strain you know?”

“I do know; except my father couldn’t handle the strain and stuck around. It wasn’t a pretty sight. He made me want to be strong so I could beat the crap out him.”

“Did you?”

“Only once, but I didn’t feel any joy. It was too easy. 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 any more.”

“You’re not going to tell me the dangers of drinking, man, cause that would be so lame,” drawls George.

“You can do whatever you want, George. Your life is yours to waste. You won’t learn by me telling you what to do. Hell, what kind of example am I? I can’t remember whole days at a time. Sometimes my mind is so foggy that I can’t remember what the hell I did that day.

“Dude! Right on.”

“It’s nothing to brag about, if I could go back and change things, I would. I can only change now.”

“So you’re telling me there’s no alcohol in that drink?”

Wolfe pushes it over to George. George picks it up and smells 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 clink glasses.

Blaze pushes a couple aside to get through the crowd. He looks above to see Crash combing the club. Vansome points towards the back of the club, and motions for Crash to continue looking. Crash nods and continues moving. As Vansome walks forward, Steele and the little punk girl move past him.

“What’s your name?” Steele asks over the roar of the crowd.

“Luanne, but my friends call me Lou,” she says.

“Well, Lou, what are you 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 murmurs under his breath.

“Look, there he is!” She points to a tall gangly grunge kid with spiky hair and more body piercing than one human should ever be allowed to have. An airport metal detector would blow a fuse on him.

“Scud, over here!” Lou beckons. Scud looks over without interest and then does a doubletake when seeing that Lou is with Steele.

“Who’s your ugly friend?” he says to Lou while looking at Steele.

Lou hits Scud in the shoulder.

“Stop being so rude! I just met her; she’s my friend. We’ve been talking about stuff.” She looks over to Steele. “What’s your name?”

“Ah Steel—Stella, my friends call me Stel.” Scud could care less about Lou’s new friend.

“Well Stella, what bullshit have you been talking to my girlfriend about?” Scud mouths off. His attitude grates on Steele. He wonders if this is how others feel about him.

“No bullshit. I was saying that underneath all your piercing crap and rude behaviour was probably someone who cared about her.”

Scud looks over to Lou. He gives her a look that resembles something close to affection; she smiles back.

“Yea, I love her lots,” he replies and gives a nasty grin and sneers, “NOT” and slaps her in the face leaving a red mark on her right cheek. “Don’t ever talk to strangers about our business, you hear?” Lou cowers and Scud raises his hand to strike again.

Steele’s hand grabs Scud’s before he gets a second chance. “I was wrong, some assholes are just assholes.” Steele pushes Scud down until he is on his knees screaming and cursing at Lou.

“So you’re going to have your ‘lesbo’ girlfriend fight for you? She wouldn’t be around later, then I’ll give you a beating you won’t forget!”

Lou looks crestfallen at the floor. Steele looks at Scud filled with rage.

“You won’t be hitting her if I break both your arms.” He raises his other fist.

“No!” Lou yells. Steele is puzzled. “Stel, you can’t hurt him!” She looks concerned for Scud’s safety.

“But he’ll hurt you,” Steele replies.

“Don’t listen to her, Lou, I was just talking you know. I could never hurt you.” Scud makes a face at Steele reinforcing his lies. Steele loosens his grip on Scud. He realizes that there may be nothing he can do to change the cycle

of violence. He's no expert on abuse, but sometimes the victim wants to believe that the beater sincerely wants to stop.

"Oh, don't loosen your grip, Stel," says Lou. Scud looks puzzled and looks back to Steele in confusion. Steele's face turns to a smile and as Scud turns his head, Lou has a huge grin on her face.

Smack! Lou belts 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 proceeds with a super kick to Scud's groin.

"Owwwwweeee," he screams in a high-pitched shrill voice.

"Don't you ever come near me again, you sleaze bucket. I'm done with you!"

He writhes on the floor unable to put any words together. Lou isn't scared of him anymore; his spell on her is broken.

"Thanks, Stel, I couldn't have found the courage to this without you."

"Lou, I think you always had it in you."

Lou raises her hand for a high five. "Girl power!" she cheers.

Steele looks at himself, shrugs and then slaps her hand.

"Girl power!" he echoes.

Back to the bar, Wolfe and George are still deep in their conversation

"Why 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 know. For years I've been kidding myself and ignoring my problems; drinking just numbed me to what was really happening in my life."

George pauses 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 about you?"

"All the time, that's what makes us human. If people can't accept you for what you are, then they're not your friends." He crosses his legs in a very feminine manner. Wolfe looks down and realizes his pose, then switches 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 thinks of Pang's tasks, Toni's contract, and Madison's demand to meet him tonight.

“I have a lot less power than you might think,” as he gazes into the wall mirror to see his ugly reflection peering back at him.

“Get outta here, dude, you always have the cool lines in the movies, especially before you’re about to ‘off’ a bad guy. Do people ever ask you to repeat stuff from your movies?”

“Almost everyday,” Wolfe nods and sips his drink. “People always want you say the same line over and over again. It gets old really quick.”

“Are you going to tell me that a movie star has it rough?” George turns and accidentally knocks over his drink and it shatters behind the bar. The bartender comes over and looks straight at George.

“It’s time you leave.” He gives George a shove backwards.

“I’m sorry,” George squeaks.

Wolfe gets into the bartender’s face. “Relax, the kid just had an accident. Why don’t you give us two non-alcoholic drinks?” The bartender shrugs.

“Fine,” the bartender looks at George, “you two ladies can have whatever you want.” He walks and around the corner to get juice in the back of the bar. George watches him leave.

“Are you okay? I get the feeling that you get pushed around a lot?” Wolfe asks.

George nods. “It’s that obvious isn’t it? I’m no Wolfe Neilson.”

“Who is? I’m certainly not the hero in the movies.” Wolfe looks back at the bartender. “Don’t let that bully and his *ladies* comment get to you.”

“Speaking of ladies, dude, who dressed you up like this?” George points at Wolfe’s makeup. “It doesn’t look like a professional did it.” George spies Wolfe’s hairy leg poking out of his dress.

“Well, they didn’t have much to work with.” Wolfe points at his breasts. “I guess I’m a fake as a man or woman. But I don’t regret all my choices. Life is 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 building character?” laughs George. “Doesn’t it matter what people think about you?”

Wolfe looks around the bar. “I’m hoping no one will recognize me.” Wolfe plays with his wig and laughs. “But seriously, people are going to criticize you whatever you do. Friends, family, newspapers will always have an opinion. Hell, if I always did what people told me to do, I’ve never try anything. Sometimes you just gotta go for it.”

George nods his head and then stands up, energized by Wolfe little pep talk. He holds out his hand. "Thanks Wolfe, you truly are a hero." George looks at the Wolfe's female clothes, "that a guy can look up to." George turns to face the bar.

"Bartender!" George motions to him to come over.

"What do you ladies want now?" he sneers.

George leaps towards the bartender across the counter. He grabs the bartender by the shoulder and neck.

Wolfe is frozen in shock. *What the hell did I say?* Wolfe thinks.

The bartender is startled and before he regains his composure, George moves forcefully with his attack. Before the bartender can shake him off, George kisses the bartender right on the lips. The bartender is surprised and then embarrassed. George is beaming, whatever the result, he's been able to be who he truly is. Wolfe starts to laugh.

"Listen, I have no idea if I'm your type but I like you. Would you see me afterwards?" George asks.

The bartender is caught completely off guard and draws 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 drops his arm back to his side and composes himself.

"Kid, I don't swing that way," as he heads to the back of the bar pantry. George walks out from behind the bar and goes back to sitting on his stool. The club patrons watch George as he sits down. The bartender grabs a drink and walks over to George.

"Here, have a drink on the house. Let's forget the whole incident ever happened." Everyone around the bar nods their approval and they go back to their conversations. Wolfe looks at George.

"You're telling me your reason for drinking was to hide you were gay? I didn't see that one coming."

"You said go for it. So I did!"

"Next time, don't take me so literal. He could have knocked your block off."

"I don't care anymore. This takes a huge load off my shoulders." He plays with the coaster and realizes there's a name and number scribbled on it. George looks up at the bartender who catches his eye and nods. George smiles.

"So what's next, George?" asks Wolfe.

“Dude, if an action star like you can be comfortable wearing women’s clothes in public, then I guess I can finally be myself.”

“You still got a way to go, but congratulations on the first step.”

“Thanks, Wolfe, here is to being true to yourself.” He clinks his glass to toast.

“Steele’s not going to believe this,” Wolfe shrugs.

Blaze is about to lose his temper. He can’t figure out how two well-known action stars can’t be found in one Hollywood club. Burn approaches from the other side of the room.

“Burn, where are they? You said the limo dropped them here.”

“I said the chauffer brought them here, maybe they skipped out?”

“I doubt it, this is definitely where they would hang...”

Vansome sees two big women walking towards the club exit. He is puzzled by their ugliness and their familiarity. Then he makes the connection.

“Burn, 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,” Burn wonders.

“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 are 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 gives Wolfe a friendly push.

“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.”

“Will you get off of this Madison kick? She’s an ice queen, and you are out of your league!” Wolfe fakes being offended while he adjusts his man breasts. They turn to exit the main door only to make eye contact with Burn. He slowly sizes them up and shakes his head in disgust. They look at each other and then turn a hasty 180 degrees only to see Crash about ten feet behind them.

“Any chance that they don’t recognize us in these monkey suits?”

They look at each other. “Naw!”

They stand back-to-back, fists ready as the two bodyguards approach from different sides. The four squares off for battle—men against she men. The club crowd stops to watch the encounter when a large female bodybuilder steps forward to stop the fight.

“Can’t you read the sign?” She points to the sign above the door. *No fighting except in the ring.*

A middle-aged announcer with salt and pepper hair steps into the ring. The spotlight shines on him as the murmuring of the crowd becomes silent.

“Ladies,” he looks at 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 roars their approval.

“In this corner,” the announcer points to the bodyguards, “weighing at a combination of 595 pounds, all the way from parts unknown, former tag team champions of the world. The fighting duo of Crash and Burn!” The crowd boos as the brothers pose their massive biceps. After styling and profiling their massive body frames, the crowd’s jeers fade.

“In the opposing the corner, at a combined weight of 475 pounds, from Hollywood, give it up for the Sisterhood!”

The spotlight shines on Wolfe and Steele. The crowd becomes hushed, so quiet you can hear a belch in the back of the club. The fans can’t decide to boo or cheer for these women. Suddenly from the middle of the club, Lu yells out, “Kick ass, ladies!”

George yells out from the bar, “They crushed the competition last week!”

Some of the people shrug their shoulders and cheer their support. The club becomes electric with the betting and money exchange. Wolfe readies himself for the fight. Steele leans over to whisper some advice.

“Watch these guys, Wolfe. They’re dirty and 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 will see your underwear!”

The announcer waits for the crowd to quiet down before he yells out the final instructions.

“Ladies and gentleman, 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 looks over to Wolfe and Steele and rephrases his words, “person win!” An older man acting as a referee steps into a neutral corner. The announcer pauses and looks out over the crowd, which is silent with anticipation.

“Let’s get ready.....to.....RUMBLE!!!!!!!!!!”

The crowd erupts in applause as Burn slaps his brother’s hand and lurches towards Wolfe. He ducks and evades a straight-arm clothesline but Burn crashes into corner knocking Steele off the ring apron and to the ground. Steele recovers and shakes himself off the floor. “So you want to play that way, do you?” Steele jumps up onto the ring corner and yells to the referee to watch the interference.

The referee looks over towards Steele as Burn slams Wolfe into his brother’s corner as the two of them double-team him with vicious body blows. Steele points towards the cheating.

“Stop them,” he yells at the referee. The referee turns just as Crash lets go of Wolfe and gives the referee an innocent look

“Who me?” he says. Burn grabs Wolfe and throws him against the ropes and uses Wolfe’s momentum against him. Burn grabs Wolfe on the bounce off the rope and slams him into the mat. This wrestling match is at its worst. Crash and Burn are in their element and they know every dirty trick possible. Through the crowd, Blaze steps forward, barking orders towards the brothers.

“Come on, hurt him! Put him out of action. End his career.” Blaze yells as he approaches the ring.

Burn slaps hands with Crash, and switches with his brother in the ring. Wolfe groggily tries to get up. He staggers towards Steele and reaches towards his open hand. He misses as Crash grabs him in a massive bear hug.

“Help me!” Wolfe yells.

Steele enters the ring to help out and is stopped by the referee who points him back to his corner. Steele angrily heads back to his corner. Burn takes a dirty shot while Crash holds Wolfe while the referee’s back is turned. The crowd boos.

“Come on you bum, watch the match,” Steele yells at the referee.

Crash is slowing squeezing the air out of Wolfe’s lungs and his head is beginning to drop to his chest. The referee inspects Wolfe and pulls his arm up and then lets it drop 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 yells. The referee does it a third time, he puts Wolfe’s arm up and it drops but halfway down it stops and Wolfe’s eyes open and his arm reaches to the sky in protest. Wolfe has found his second wind.

He pushes Crash off of him and shoves him into the ring post. Crash hits his head on the post, which only makes him angry. He lunges while Wolfe ducks by doing the splits and punches Crash in the gut. Crash bends over and falls to the mat. Wolfe crawls towards Steele. Crash staggers towards Burn. The crowd screams out in excitement.

Wolfe falls and slaps the hand of Steele. He leaps into the ring and with a falling spin kick to the back of Crash’s head. He falls short of touching Burn. Burn tries to come into the ring anyway and is stopped by the referee. Then Steele does something out of the character. He grabs Crash and takes his semi-conscious hand and tags Burn himself. The fans go wild. Burn is amazed.

“What a ham!” exclaims Wolfe from the opposite corner.

Burn charges in while Steele lies flat missing the hit. Burn slams into the ropes and bounces back into arms of Steele who trips him to the mat. Burn is groggy and as he tries to get up, Steele advances to the corner ring post. He grabs the rope and climbs to the top post. He looks to the right and the crowd roars. He looks to the left and the crowd screams. He coils his body and then springs to the slowly rising Burn with a solid forearm to the head knocking him down again.

“Finish him off!” yells Wolfe.

Steele turns Burn to his back and tries to place Burn in an arm bar submission hold.

“Never thought I’d get to use this movie move for real,” yells Steele to no one in particular. The referee gets in position.

“Submit or I’m going to break your arm,” Steele yells. Burn looks ready to submit to the referee when...

Bam!

Steele falls flat on his back from a solid kick to the head. Blaze has entered the ring.

Blaze pulls Steele up and has Burn hold him to deliver a spinning roundhouse kick. Blaze lands it perfectly knocking Steele to the mat. The referee tries to stop the interference but Crash pulls him out of the ring. Blaze basks in the attention of the crowd, raising his arms despite the fact they are

booing him. Blaze turns to finish his work and receives a flying leap from Wolfe who knocks him on his ass. The crowd screams its approval. Wolfe gives Blaze several vicious chops to the chest and knocks him down to one knee. Wolfe runs at the rope and uses the momentum to create a flying leap at Blaze. Inches before contact, Crash who has already entered the ring, scoops Wolfe out of mid-air. All combatants are in the ring with a decided 3-2 advantage. Crash and Burn hold Wolfe and Steele's arms behind their backs while Blaze softens them up with a flurry of punches and kicks. Blaze is ready to give his finishing blow.

"What if one of you broke your arm and couldn't finish your movie? What a shame!" Steele and Wolfe look at each other. Neither one can struggle out of their captors massive arms. Blaze readies the killing blow. His kick is aimed straight at Wolfe's right arm. He sizes it up and aims right at the wrist to inflict some permanent damage. A slender leg in a white jumpsuit deflects his kick.

Madison Jones has arrived!

"What's your problem, Blaze?" She kicks him in the head causing him to stagger back.

"These guys may be losers," she points at Steele's and Wolfe female clothes, "but they're my losers. Do you understand, you stuck up," she punches Blaze in the head, "pompous," she punches him in the stomach, "prick!" she punches him in the groin. Blaze doubles over with pain. Steele and Wolfe push backwards in unison on Crash and Burn forcing them to back to the ropes. They use the momentum to twist their bodies in the air so that they each land on the mat on top of the bodyguards, knocking the wind out of them. They drag the wrestlers to the side and wrap the ropes in a figure eight around their arms, causing both wrestlers to be tied to the ring rope. Unfortunately for them, their own weight keeps the ropes tight around their arms, making them immobile. Steele and Wolfe run to the opposite side of the ring and hit the ropes using the momentum to come flying back at the brothers. They use their forearm momentum to send both Crash and Burn sailing over the ropes, onto the ground below. Blaze is distracted by the brothers' exit. He turns and sees a female finger pointing in his face.

"You're watching the wrong show. This female," she points at her body, "is the real deal!" She does a standing front kick that pushes Blaze back over the ropes to the floor.

"Your winners, the Sisterhood!" yells the announcer and grabs the arms of Steele, Wolfe and Madison who raise their arms in the air. The crowd roars

as loud music fills the air to maintain the adrenalin of the fight. As the crowd goes back to drinks and socializing, Wolfe and Steele shake hands.

“We did it! We actually beat those musclebound freaks.”

“You weren’t half bad.”

“You were almost as good as I was, which is saying a lot!”

Suddenly Wolfe receives a slap on the face.

“That should knock the taste out of your mouth,” sneers Madison.

“Owww,” he wails. “What the hell was that for?” questions Wolfe as he rubs his jaw.

“What is that for? I just saved your butts and the two of you are shaking hands like you are the heroes. You owe me an explanation. Don’t play stupid with me just because you’re wearing those getups,” she points at their women’s clothes.

“We can explain,” starts Steele.

“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 looks at them, “Well maybe the second ugliest guys.” She thinks for a second and gives them both a long hard look. “Are you guys gay?”

Steele almost chokes.

Wolfe thinks quickly. “I’ll tell you whether I’m gay if you’ll tell me if you’re a lesbian?” Madison makes a face like she’s ready to club Wolfe.

“Will you give me an answer, Wolfe? Why are you are dressed like this?” Behind them Luanne and George have come out of the crowd to stand behind the heroes in the ring. Wolfe looks behind them.

“Let’s grab a pizza with our new friends and we’ll explain everything.”

“Lead the way, action girls!” Madison adds with sarcasm. The five of them leave the club for food.

“She didn’t answer your question! And look at the way she walks. She’s a lesbian!” Steele whispers to Wolfe.

“She looks fine from here. Sounds like you’re in love,” teases Wolfe.

The next morning—on the movie set 9 *a.m.*

Steele and Wolfe bow to Pang as they leave the fitness center.

“I think he was pleased with our results last night,” says Steele. They walk out of the gym into the waiting tram. The driver takes them around the movie set building for the morning’s first shoot.

“You’re right, his workout wasn’t as difficult as usual either. We’re finally making some progress with him. If I could find a way to make progress with Madison, I’d be all set,” answers Wolfe.

“Good luck. I don’t think she believed a word we told her about Pang’s challenges. She probably thinks we’re weirdos getting our thrills out of 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 movie business and publish a book on lame-ass pick-up lines. You would find a whole audience of pathetic guys who would eat that stuff up.”

“You know what, Steele?”

“What?”

“Every once and in a while you come up with a really good idea. I may do that.” Steele slaps his forehead.

“I can’t believe you; when I’m sarcastic you take it as a compliment.” They jump out of the tram and round the corner of the set. There is a crowd of people milling about talking with elevated, excited voices. Everyone is gathered around Toni, who is standing on a platform above the group.

“What’s going on?” questions Wolfe.

“Beats me,” says Steele.

They walk towards the group. Toni notices them approaching and motions to everyone to quiet down.

“All right, everyone’s here, listen up! I’ve got something important to discuss,” she yells.

“What’s wrong, Toni? Somebody getting canned?” yells one of the stage crew. Everyone laughs but some of the laughter is mixed with nervous trepidation.

“I want to thank everyone for the work on the picture over the last few weeks. The Hollywood buzz on our project has been overwhelming. All the screenings that Sven has shown to the press have gotten terrific response.”

Sven is sitting in the corner away from the group in his director’s chair. He seems gloomy and uncharacteristically quiet. He weakly raises his hand at the mention of his name.

“I sense a ‘but’,” Wolfe yells.

She nods and continues. “The ‘but’ is this, all productions need money to continue and as of last night,” she looks at Wolfe and Steele who return puzzled stares, “one of our main backers has terminated his commitment. I

have been unable to get the studio to confirm to more money until this matter can be resolved. As of this minute, the picture will temporarily cease production. I'm afraid I'll have to ask everyone to leave the set effective immediately."

"What!" The group erupts into anger and dismay. A host of voices fill 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 steps down from the platform and works her way through the crowd to Wolfe and Steele. They are both struggling with Toni's speech.

"Toni, what happened? How could the money just disappear like that?" Steele raises his arms in anger and frustration.

"You know movies, Steele. Movie making is a fickle business. Some times backers get cold feet and cut their loses. He called first thing this morning to inform us all his money has been moved out our account. He said any further money concerns should be dealt with through his lawyer."

"This is it? Just when I was starting to put up with Wolfe, 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?" Wolfe pleads. "I mean anything?"

"You both have one chance to turn this around, one chance only. Unless the two of you can convince our main backer to change his mind, this movie is finished!"

Chapter Nine

Money and Gadgets

Dark shadows dance on the wooden wall illuminated by the large masses of dripping candles. An intruder silently crosses the floor; moonlight illuminates Blaze's face in the mirrors lined along the wall. Majestic statues ornate the corners of the room while huge canvas curtains drape from the ceiling onto the floor. A cool breeze blows the curtains lightly on the floor; making the only sound in the temple. Stealthily, he crosses the room past the wall of mirrors. Blaze peers at his covered face in the reflection and then looks away, suddenly alerted by some far away sound. He searches for the source of the noise.

Crash!

A hand comes through the glass mirror, grabbing a stranglehold on Blaze's throat. He gasps and grabs the arm of his assailant, pulling the rest of the body through the mirror. Shards of glass sail throughout the room and both men tumble to the floor. The attacker jumps up quickly into a karate stance as both the martial artists square off. The attacker throws a punch to Blaze's head that he easily evades. A punch to the midsection is swiftly blocked. The attacker spins a roundhouse kick and hits nothing but air and smashes into the mirror behind him, breaking more glass. He turns and sees Blaze silently waiting his approach. The attacker grabs several broken glass shards in one hand and launches into a series of kicks and fists that are blocked at each turn. He feints a punch and then cuts Blaze on his chest, drawing blood. The attacker smiles. Blaze looks at his wound and touches his chest. He brings his hand to his mouth and licks the blood. He smiles while the attacker frowns. Blaze flips across the floor and lands a solid blow to the midsection of his attacker. Blaze shrieks a fighting scream as he releases all the air from his body to impact his punch. The attacker grunts, eyes widen and then he slumps unconscious to the floor.

Whhhossh!

A sharp metal fighting star hits the wall just below the Blaze's ear. He turns around and falling into the splits to avoid another star flying to his groin. The next star flies straight at his heart. Blaze snaps it to a complete stop with his palms in the air inches from his chest. The new attacker pulls a samurai sword from its sheath and slashes it through the air in a cross eight fashion at a speed almost beyond human thought. His mastery of the sword is flawless as he executes a series of complicate moves punctuated by a swipe at a row of candles that are cut in two. The candles do not move until he claps his hands and they tumble to the floor. He smiles a wicked grin, illuminating a silver capped tooth. He gives a battle cry and steps towards Blaze to deliver his deathblow.

He stops his fatal shot when he realizes a throwing star is protruding from his forehead. Seconds later he falls dead to the floor. Blaze walks over the fallen body and steps into a doorway. He sees a shadow of another assailant and removes a knife from under his tunic. He throws it but misses his target and it lands deep into the wooden wall. The running shadow moves steadily into the darkness, causing Blaze to give chase down a set of steps. The air becomes damp and sweet smelling as he walks into a wine cellar. The room smells of mildew and the walls drip with moisture. Blaze stops at the base of the stairs and explores the room with his limited visibility. There are rows of shelves with large barrels with spouts and bottles of wines stacked high. Suddenly a noise from the back of the basement causes Blaze to turn around. A new attacker raises his head to show his face it is concealed by an old evil looking mask. Suddenly, from different rows of wines shelves, four other masked figures slowly walk out towards Blaze, backing him against the wall. Trapped!

Blaze silently assesses his expressionless opponents. The five figures approach, a large one with a mace on a chain attacks first. The mace bites into the rock wall inches from Blaze's shoulder. Blaze grabs the end of the mace and leaps at his attacker. He wraps the chain around the attacker's neck, breaking it instantly. His body slips to the floor. The second attacker swipes his weapon in the air narrowly missing the Blaze's chest. Blaze avoids the dagger and breaks the attacker's arm at the elbow. He smashes the attackers nose, pushing the bone into his brain causing instant death. The second attacker drops lifeless to the floor. Blaze takes the dagger from the lifeless hand and avoids a kick by the third attacker. He uses the knife to puncture the belly of this attacker and twists it making the wound fatal. The third attacker falls in a bloodied heap. Blaze feels liquid and pieces of glass as a wine bottle

is smashed over his head. The fourth attacker tenses, hoping for success. However Blaze shakes his head, grabs the broken bottle by the neck and plunges it into the throat of his attacker. The fourth attacker falls writhing to the floor. Blaze looks at the bottle.

“Must be a bad year.”

He turns to the fifth attacker who has not moved during the entire fight. He is massive, easily reaching seven feet. This final attacker is the most skilled and has assessed Blaze’s fighting skills. The two stare motionless waiting for the other to make the first move. They brace for attack, suddenly Blaze hears a funny sound; he hears sobbing.

“Remove your mask,” he commands to the giant.

A large hand slowly removes the mask to reveal a grotesque face with one eye larger than the other. There are tears coming from his big eye. Blaze turns his face to avoid the ugliness.

“Now I know why you wear a mask!”

The man cringes. “Please spare me, I will not attack you.” The giant bends slightly in a submissive pose.

“Lead me to your sensei and you will not die by my hand tonight,” commands Blaze.

The misshapen figure nods and gives a grotesque smile. The giant relaxes as he averts his death. He makes a fatal mistake of glancing upwards. Blaze notices the look and moves 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 looks in shock at the blade imbedded into his chest. He looks at Blaze and then falls face forward. Blaze looks at the fallen heap of the giant.

“Sorry, pal, I guess you didn’t cut it!”

A hand claps behind him as a solitary figure dressed in black ninja attire steps into the light. The sensei!

“Your pupils need to study harder. They belong to me now!” commands Blaze as their bodies lie on the floor around him.

“You have met the first class. Now meet the black belts,” the sensei answers.

From all directions, dozens of men run into the room with samurai swords, staffs, axes and numerous other instruments of death. Blaze is easily outnumbered thirty-to-one. Blaze gestures to the sensei.

“Make sure you save the last dance with me.” The killers advance, there is no escape. Blaze back flips through the air taking the heads off of two of his attackers.

“No one should live forever!” as their blades descend on his body

The image on the television screen freezes as Blaze’s face utters his line.

“Stop!” Blaze yells. He jumps up from his leather chair, sitting in front of the editing suite. He has been watching the footage from his new martial arts movie *Eye of the Dragon*. There are two other people sitting with Blaze. In front of him is the editor and the young director is 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. Can’t those special effects geeks get anything right? I can still see my cables in several scenes. Remember, I never die in my movies; this is just a dream sequence. You need to add a filter to the shots to make them seem more dream-like. We have to reshoot this scene!”

“We can’t, Blaze,” the director replies. “We’re way over budget and the cost would be phenomenal to raise the set and bring all the fighters back.” Blaze steps over to the director and looks him in the eyes.

“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 storms out of the suite; Crash and Burn follow in behind him towards Blaze’s trailer. Crash puts 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 turns into a wide grin. “Finally some good news. I couldn’t leave a simple task to the two of you. Our partner took care of it.”

“Isn’t it a bad idea to owe the partner?” asks 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.”

The car lurches as it hits a pothole on the street.

“Watch it,” yells Steele. “No wonder you’re no longer a stuntman, you’re driving is awful.”

“You have been whining non-stop since we left the movie set. Will you give it a break?”

“I don’t think this trip is worth it,” moans Steele as he leans back into his seat. He sits in the passenger seat of Wolfe’s convertible as they are driving west on Sunset Boulevard towards the mansions of Beverly Hills.

“Worth it? If talking to this backer gets the movie back to production,

wouldn't that be worth it?" Wolfe shakes his head.

"Of course, I want to be back on the movie set. But what are we going to say to change his mind?" Steele looks down at his feet. "Hell, why would he listen to anything we have to say? Maybe we are two has-been actors."

The car screeches to a stop as Wolfe pulls off to the shoulder of a residential street. He turns 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!" demands Wolfe.

He grabs Steele by the throat and starts to strangle him.

"All right, I'll take it back," Steele answers. Wolfe starts to loosen his grip. "You are actually an alcoholic has-been action star!" taunts Steele and he grabs Wolfe by his neck to try to break Wolfe's grip.

"At least I'm not a has-been that nobody likes," replies Wolfe.

The two of them have their arms locked on each other's throats. They struggle back and forth hitting both sides of the car interior. Around a corner, a Star Tours bus turns down the street with a group of tourists clicking madly away with their cameras at famous star's homes. The tour guide is proudly describing the area.

"To the right is the mansion of famous baseball great, Roster Clements." She stops and gazes at the convertible on the opposite side of the road with Wolfe and Steele fighting. She gets 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' rings from the tourists as dozens of cameras flash at the car.

"Phil, slow the bus down!" The tour guide exclaims to the driver.

The bus comes to a halt, but Steele and Wolfe don't even notice. As the tourists start clicking their cameras, they stop their punching long enough to sense their audience. Both Steele and Wolfe look at the tourists in the double-decker bus who stop snapping shots. Suddenly an old man yells out.

"Take him out, Wolfe, you're stronger!"

"No way!" a grandmother from Ohio yells. "My money's on Steele, he can kick Wolfe's butt any day of the week." The bus erupts in a series of angry yells, pushing and shoving. Steele pulls the top on the convertible to hide from the tourists' view. Wolfe turns the ignition and they speed past the bus.

Wolfe looks over to Steele.

“See, we matter; people still watch us!”

“Great, Wolfe, we have a blue-haired fan club. If we can start a fight amongst a bunch of tourists, I can’t wait to see what we inspire the backer to do.”

They ride in silence as they approach a large metal gate. Wolfe speaks into an intercom.

“Good afternoon, Neilson and Taylor to see Mr. Tassel.”

“One moment please,” a female security guard replies from the speaker.

“Wait a second, Taylor as in Steele Taylor and Neilson as in Wolfe Neilson?” Wolfe smiles at Steele as if to say *Who’s a has-been?*

“In the flesh,” Wolfe replies to the intercom.

“My son has seen all of your movies, can I have an autograph?”

“We’d love to,” Wolfe leans over to the speaker.

“Which one of us is your son’s favourite?” Steele asks.

They both lean closer to the speaker to hear her response. She pauses, then she speaks.

“To be honest, my son really likes Blaze Vansome. He does some incredible stunts. But I just thought it would be a kick to get the signature from two former actions stars.”

“Former!’ yells Steele, about to climb through the intercom and strangle the woman.

Wolfe puts his finger to his mouth and pushes 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 drive their car through the main gates. They follow a cobblestone driveway and park along a circular turn. The mansion’s grounds are exotic with colourful foliage and water fountains. Lush vines hang from the trees and parrots perch on branches high above them.

“How did this guy make his millions?” inquires Steele as he steps out of the convertible.

“Toni described him as self-made multimillionaire from a dotcom corporation. His company was worth 200 million on paper before he sold it all. The stock tanked afterwards when the product bombed after the crash.

“Smart guy, must of known when to sell,” replies Steele

“Actually, it was more luck than business savvy.”

Both Steele and Wolfe look behind to the source of the voice. Richard

Tassel grins from ear to ear as he extends his hand out to introduce himself to the two action stars. Tassel is short in stature, but next to Wolfe and Steele he appears even more unimposing. On top of his height, he has a mass of bright red curls and thick bifocals that add to his awkward appearance. Because of first impressions, many people have made the mistake of underestimating Richard Tassel's business ability. Only his voice belies someone who is mature in years and has a keen mind.

"I wanted to keep the company for another year, but this property came up and I feel in love with it. So I decided to sell my shares. That decision made the difference in getting an asking price of \$200 per share vs. what is now."

"Which is?" asks Steele.

"Are you familiar with penny stocks?"

Steele laughs, "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," says Wolfe.

"Of course."

"Why suddenly pull out your backing of our movie?" asks Wolfe.

"Our producer told us you were a big fan. What's changed?" questions Steele.

"It's nothing to do with the two of you but everything to do with my family. My reasons are much easier to show than to explain. Why don't you follow me?"

The three of them walk towards the back of the house. As they step into the heart of the garden, Steele and Wolfe are 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 tiptoe around the beast to avoid disturbing it.

"Tassel runs a freaking animal reserve," Steele whispers to Wolfe. Richard motions them to a huge pool area populated by dolphins and other sea life. He sits by the edge and points into the water.

"After selling my business, these animals became my hobby. Most of them are fighting extinction. I can't return them to a life in the wild, but I can ensure their safety in my sanctuary. They come to me injured, deformed, unable to survive in the wild."

"Are you telling us that your animals are more important than our movie?" Steele interrupts.

"Steele," yells Wolfe.

“No, let him speak. As much as I have always idolized the two of you in the movies, I’ve heard that Steele was a jerk in real life.” Steele looks at Richard and collects his next words.

“I’m sorry. This movie meant a lot to me, to both of us. I don’t understand what these animals have to do with your cutting your financial backing.”

“Apology accepted,” answers Richard. He continues his explanation. “You have been my heroes for years, both of you. I love the extreme action in your movies and the wild stunts. You made me forget about my worries for two hours in the theatre. Naturally, I jumped at the chance to finance a movie starring both of you when my lawyer presented it to me. What’s twenty million to be part of action movie history?”

“Twenty million?” Steele’s eyebrow rises.

Wolfe hits him on the back. “He really likes us!”

“I signed months ago. But once production began, I started getting threatening phone calls, letters, and lawyer correspondence, to drop my commitment. Nuisance complaints began coming in from fictitious neighbours complaining about the animals on my sanctuary. Even in a town known for its tolerance of the rich, the police were threatening to remove the animals from my home.”

”What did you do?”

“What any wealthy man does, I issued an army of lawyers on them. They said not to worry about it. Still I couldn’t figure out why someone would spend considerable resources and time to try to end my financing for a Hollywood movie. The strangest thing was despite all the paperwork they sent my lawyers; we could never track down who was behind it. They were invisible.”

“It has to be somebody fairly powerful and well connected to stay hidden like that,” replies Wolfe.

“That leaves you out,” Steele jeers at Wolfe.

“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 pros. They left no trail to counter sue until we researched one of the lawyers they were using.”

“Don’t tell me, he had mob ties.”

“You’re right. How did you know?”

“In my movie, *Leader of the Pack*, I played a young trial lawyer who fights the mob bringing their Don to trial. It’s a good movie, *Time* magazine gave it an eight!” swaggers Wolfe.

“The lawyer had definite mob connections, but I couldn’t find out who and what they had against me. Then early this morning came the last straw,” answers Richard.

“Did they put a hit on you?” Steele asks.

Wolfe rolls his eyes.

“Nothing so dramatic. But much more effective.” He pushes a manila envelop across to them. Steele opens it first. He shuffles through a number of pictures of a young red-haired boy in a schoolyard with a striking resemblance to Richard.

“Your son?” Steele states.

“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 pulls 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 takes a deep breath.

“They were going to hurt your son?”

“Not if I can help it! I’ve taken him out of 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 Fountaine and told her to cancel my commitment. I have nothing against you, but this hit too close to home.”

“We understand,” motions Wolfe. “Who would want to sabotage our movie so badly that they would threaten your family?”

“Have either one of made any enemies lately,” asks Richard.

“Egomaniac Vansome at the club,” replies Steele.

Both Wolfe and Steele look at each other.

“You don’t think...” Wolfe starts.

“You don’t think unless there’s a drink in your hands.”

“Vansome’s a movie star like us. He doesn’t have the connections to do this? Does he?”

“Only one way to find out,” nods Steele.

Wolfe turns to their host. “Richard, thanks so much for your time. We’re sorry our movie has endangered your son. We’re going to find the people that did this.”

“Thank you. I’m sure you understand that my family comes first. But you find the people that did these and put them away, I’d be happy to refinance your movie.”

“We’ll try our best,” Steele shakes Richard’s hand.

Both Steele and Wolfe wave goodbye as they leave the jungle paradise. The two of them jump into the convertible.

“What’s next?”

“We need to find out more about Vansome and his connection to those pictures,” says Steele. “There’s one way to find out.”

“What do you mean?”

“We should pay him an unexpected visit.”

“Break into his house? How?”

“Remember where you played the detective for Scotland Yard, you were the master of locks; no door could keep you out. Wasn’t any of that real?” asks Steele.

“I was a clever detective, 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.”

“So we need to find someone who can provide us with the real tools.”

“And you know such a person?”

“We recently met such a person,” as Steele produces a business card.

The LA Suburbs 5 p.m.

The late afternoon sun warms the roof of a small home in the San Fernando Valley. The house is a typical suburban home, dead grass from last year’s drought on the front lawn, children’s toys scattered around the front entrance. The only thing unusual about the home is the garage. It is slightly bigger than most with a large number of vents, wires and antenna sticking from the back. In the window stands an Indian idol that watches all those that enter. Steele rings the doorbell. The sound of footsteps reverberates as the person walks towards the garage door’s entrance. The doorknob turns. The door opens and Wolfe and Steele stand at the entranceway.

“Hamesh, bet you didn’t expect to see us?” Steele holds out his card from the jail.

“I just finished praying to my many gods and you appeared. Please come in!” beckons Hamesh. He is excited by his visitors’ arrival and rushes around the garage trying to clean it up.

“Sindhu, we have guests!” Hamesh yells over the stairs leading into the house. The clanging of pots and pans can be heard from the kitchen and a female’s voice shouts.

“Hamesh, you didn’t tell me you were having company. Now I must cook more food!” A petite Indian woman rounds the corner. She is wearing a very colourful traditional Indian costume and has long black braided hair. She is surprised by the appearance of the action stars and drops a tray of Indian fried cookies on the floor.

“Hamesh, you brought movie stars home. Why didn’t you tell me?” She looks down on the floor. “Look what I’ve done!” Sindu starts to pick up cookies that have fallen off the tray.

“That’s okay, eight second rule,” as Steele grabs a cookie from the floor and eats it.

“Don’t just take one. Take another. Eat, eat, eat!” she commands the men to take the others from her tray.

“Sindhu, these are my friends. They may offer me a most magnificent part in their next film! Isn’t that true?” he looks at Steele.

“That’s part of the reason we’re here,” Steele replies. Sindhu looks 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 waves a cookie at them in a menacing manner.

“No, your husband is a good guy in our books,” replies Steele.

“He is, although he does get into some trouble now and again,” she looks at him and pulls his earlobe.

“Ouch!” Hamesh yells 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 about who came to visit us.” She picks up the pile of cookies and heads 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 heads back into the house. She is too quick for Steele or Wolfe to answer her. Hamesh looks at Steele.

“This is most exciting. Did you really mean it that I could be in your movie?”

“Absolutely, but there’s been a delay in production. We need your help to get the movie back on track. Once we start filming again, we’ll bring you in. Deal?” Steele asks.

“Deal!” Hamesh has a big smile on his face like a kid on Christmas morning. “How can I help you kind gentlemen?”

Steele and Wolfe look at each other, Steele continues 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, than I, your humble servant can certainly get it for you.”

“Good, then let’s say we have a ‘job’,” Wolfe puts 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 exasperates Steele.

“We want to break in to Blaze Vansome’s house to find out how he shut down our movie. Can you help us get in?” Steele interrupts.

Hamesh puts his hands together and frowns. “You want a poor Indian man to break the law to take down a major action movie star?” He smiles and says in his rushed Indian dialect. “Oh praise be my many gods,” as he looks at his idol. “Count me in!” Hamesh holds out his hand. Steele shakes it to signify a deal. Hamesh continues.

“I have a Indian friend who works in a security firm that could 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 says proudly of his heritage.

“I’m starting to get a sense of that. Hamesh this could be the start of a beautiful relationship!” exclaims Wolfe.

“Whoa,” interrupts Steele. “Before we start congratulating ourselves on a job we haven’t even started, shouldn’t we have equipment to help us break in? In the movies I’ve done, I’ve always crashed in through a wall or a window, I’m not a specialist at breaking in a house quietly.”

“Do not worry my rather, large friend,” Hamesh puffs out his chest. “I will teach you both the secrets in breaking through security systems.” Hamesh pauses as wondering if the two movie stars could be bugged and adds the disclaimer.

“...from stories some fellow Indians have told me.”

“Of course,” Wolfe nods 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 picks 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 jewelry heist to shut down the alarms in a museum.” Wolfe puffs up his chest. “I know my gadgets!”

Steele grabs it and presses the button while pointing it to the back of the garage. In the opposite direction, the garage door rises up and folds under the ceiling. Steele presses it a second time to close the door.

“Both of us are ready to learn, at this point in our careers, we have nothing to lose,” Steele replies.

“We could go to jail!” adds Wolfe.

“All right, we have everything to lose. But we’re going to do this. Why? Because of pride. This is our last chance at redemption. To prove to all the movie critics that we can make good movies. To prove to all the producers 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 asks.

“Of course. But it doesn’t hurt that I’m broke and I 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 walks over to the workbench and rubs his hands in anticipation of assisting the movie actors. Hamesh shows an ordinary wall full of tools from pliers to hammers. He presses a button on the corner of a beam and the wall rotates to replace the lawn tools with hi-tech gadgets.

“I will teach you the ten easy steps of how to break into a house, but you must use my equipment,” states Hamesh.

“You have our full attention,” replies Wolfe.

“Then as the English say, let’s get this party started!” Hamesh picks up his phone.

A phone call later.

Hamesh spreads out some of his tools on the workbench.

“My fellow Indian within security has told me that Vansome’s home has a set of guard dogs trained to attack anything with a heartbeat.”

Steele offers some advice. “In my movie *The Last Avenger*, I took out a gang of guard dogs with my bare hands. They fell like rice in the wind.” Steele holds out his hands as weapons of destruction.

“I bet you were so scared that you had to change your underwear after every scene. You were worried that one of their choppers would bite your ‘Tiny Tim’,” teases Wolfe.

“No dog is getting close to this.” Steele points to his crotch. “I’ll shoot them before they come ten feet of me, right between the eyes,” Steele touches the bridge of his nose.

“Would you wake up, Steele? This isn’t one of your movies. You can’t go around shooting people’s dogs to break into a house!” Wolfe yells.

“Actually,” Hamesh picks up a mean looking pistol, “that’s exactly what you must do.”

“What?” They both seem puzzled.

“See,” Hamesh shoots the gun and a dart lands dead center in 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 picks up the gun and aims through the scope. “No problem, I am an expert marksman.” He aims at the head of a picture of a Rottweiler and hits it dead center causing the cardboard cutout to fall over. “What can I say?” Steele holds out his arms for the applause.

Hamesh takes the gun back.

“Ah, but my friendly action star, this no movie. If we were in an Indian action movie, we would break out into song and dance, but that’s another story. The dog won’t just sit there and wait for you to shoot him. 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 my instructions?”

“Yeah, how many darts?” replies Steele.

“You get five darts. Don’t waste them!” Hamesh grabs something from the filing cabinet. “This is in case the worst does happen and you use all of your darts. If the dog is still on your tail, try this.” He puts a small tube in Steele’s pocket.

“What’s that?” Steele looks at 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’ve watched too many of your movies, Wolfe, obviously it’s a piece of meat to distract the dog,” answers Steele.

“Both of you have not watched enough Indian movies. We have no money for grenades, we just blow smoke in your face instead; but that’s another story. 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 pulls some 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 she’s caught you not finishing your supper. But that’s another story. Do you understand my bicep abundant friend?”

“Yes, in my movie, *Bullet to the Brain*, I cut through a whole wall of glass doors with a sub-machine gun and it shattered in seconds,” comments Steele.

“And all the crooks were told in the script to ignore the noise,” laughs Wolfe.

“Using my mini flamethrower, 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 window sill coming up. Enter through the door after you shut the alarm off and only use the glass cutter as a last resort.”

“Are you going to show us what computerized gadget is used for taking the alarm system out? Must be pretty high tech?”

“I will continue to surprise my North American friends,” Hamesh hands Wolfe a cellular phone. Wolfe is first puzzled and then smiles.

“Oh, I get it, the phone is disguised. It is really a high-tech alarm decoder.” He opens the phone and tries to reveal a secret compartment. He is puzzled 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 says.

“I’ll work on 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 may not be the cohesive unit I once believed?” Hamesh asks.

“Don’t let Steele’s attitude put you off, he loves working with me.”

“Wolfe, have you been drinking again?”

“You two can figure it out later who gets to make the call,” Hamesh hands 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 puts his on. “How do I know these work?”

“I can lock you in a small closet to test them out,” offers Wolfe.

“That’s okay, I’ll take Hamesh’s word for it.”

Hamesh throws a grenade over to Wolfe. Wolfe almost drops it and has a look of shock on his face.

“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 grabs 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 looks perplexed.

Hamesh points at one of the two rolls. “That should do it and use this trigger.” He hands 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,” says Steele. “What’s next?”

Hamesh reaches into a desk and pulls out a small bottle.

“What’s this, air freshener?” Steele is about to spray the nozzle.

“Don’t do that! The spray is highly concentrated pepper spray used by LAPD. It will bring a large man down in seconds.”

“Pepper spray. Remind me to use this the next time Steele barbecues a steak. Anything else?”

“The final piece of equipment you should have is the spy ear.” He holds a miniature earpiece that fits 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 on a midnight snack, the spy ear will amplify the sound around you up to ten times."

"Looks like something out of cereal box," comments Steele.

"Try it on," Hamesh commands.

Steele fits it over his ear. "I can't hear anything," he complains.

"Turn up the volume."

Steele fiddles with the control. Wolfe sneaks up behind him.

"Hey, Steele, can you hear me?" he screams.

Steele reacts as if pain overloads his ear. He turns around and punches Wolfe in the midsection, knocking him down.

"Stop yelling, these things are sensitive! But cool, you can tell the exact direction the sound is coming from."

"Hey, let me try."

"No way, you defaulted when you tried the junior high joke on me."

Wolfe looks over to Hamesh. "Hamesh, do you want to join us on this expedition?"

"My apologies, 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," answers 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 asks.

"Good question, worthy of a swami to answer, on another day. 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 tools is where the real money is made and it's perfectly legal! Isn't America a wonderful country? I could tell you many adventures I had selling to my fellow countrymen in South Indian but..."

"That's another story, I know, I know," interrupts Wolfe.

"Nothing sweeter than a merchant gone legit," laughs Steele.

They get 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've already planned your part in our movie, as the scientist who supplies weapons to the heroes," says Steele. Hamesh looks disappointed.

“What’s wrong, I thought you wanted to have a part in our movie?”

“I do, it’s just that...can I get a scene where I shoot someone?” Hamesh looks up at them with expectant eyes. Steele and Wolfe laugh.

“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 hands them a receipt. “This will cover costs for the tools and security map. I eagerly await your arrival tonight.”

Wolfe and Steele wave goodbye and jump into the convertible. Wolfe starts to back the car out of the driveway. Steele looks at the receipt.

“Oh, my God,” Steele exclaims.

Wolfe stops the car. “What wrong now?” asks Wolfe.

“I think we just got robbed the legit way.”

Chapter Ten

Dog Eat Dog

Vansome's Mansion *around midnight*

Two men, dressed completely in black, drop down from a stone wall and land softly in a garden. They kneel in the soil and watch as a light turns off around the pool. Wolfe and Steele have acted this scene out dozens of times in countless movies. But this time it's for real and there's only one take.

"Should we go in now? Maybe Vansome hasn't gone to sleep yet," asks Wolfe.

"We've already talked about this. The security company changes 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 looks at Steele.

"I've had to downsize." Steele uses a pair of binoculars to look into the mansion's grounds.

"Which way?"

Wolfe points to the right. They creep down to the end of the flowerbed.

"Where's the service entrance?"

"Over there," He points to the lighted door in the distance.

"Piece of cake, we'll be home before Letterman is over."

Steele rushes out into the open towards the doorway.

"Steele, don't move!"

Steele turns around to see Wolfe's scared gaze looking at something in front of him. Steele turns around slowly and can barely make out the outline of a huge Doberman. The dog's eyes and fangs glow in the darkness. The dog issues a menacing deep growl.

"Stand perfectly still!" whispers Wolfe.

"Shoot the frigging gun before it bites me," stammers Steele.

Wolfe pulls the dart gun out of his vest. Steele stands like a statue. The dog's eyes are locked onto Steele's face. Wolfe aims with the scope and fires. His first shot goes sailing over the dog's head straight into the ground.

"Idiot, you missed," hisses 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 stares 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 motion and goes for my throat?"

"Well, if you want me to waste another dart."

"I've seen how effective that was. For an action star, 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 watches the dog. It hasn't decided if Steele is a threat yet and it contemplates to attack. Steele shuffles to the right. The dog barks but turns 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 moves a little more to the right causing the dog to arch its back, ready to pounce.

"Wolfe! Get him NOW!"

Wolfe has a perfect shot and fires the dart gun. The dog charges headlong at Steele. The dart lands noiselessly in the ground where the dog used to be.

"Wolfe!" Steele yells. "Do something!"

Steele is running for life with the dog in hot pursuit. The Doberman doesn't bark but is intent on its chase. Wolfe charges after them and tries to line up the back flank of the dog.

"I've got you this time, you mangy mutt!" Wolfe whispers and pulls the trigger for the third time.

Fshhhootttt! The dart flies through the air straight at the dog's rear end. Suddenly, the dog veers right to miss a tree and the dart sails pass and hits Steele in the butt. He stumbles to the edge of the pool.

"Wolfe, I going to kill you!"

He falls face first into the pool. The dog doesn't lose a step and leaps into the air and into the water. Steele swims to the other edge with the Doberman paddling furiously to catch a hold of him.

“Wolfe will you hurry up and shoot that dog!”

Wolfe aims his last dart. He imagines he’s playing his role of an adventurer in one of his *Fossil Hunter* movies. *No pressure* he thinks, *only one dart left after this, if I miss, then the Doberman gets Steele*. He hesitates, *maybe missing is not necessarily a bad thing*.

“Wolfe!” Steele breaks his concentration. Wolfe lines up the dog in the crosshairs and fires. “Smack!” The dart hits the Doberman in the back while it’s paddling in the pool. Steele pulls himself out of the deep end. The dog’s jaws snap on thin air, just missing Steele’s foot. Steele squeezes the water out of his shirt.

“Jesus, Wolfe, did you have to hit me?” He takes the dart out of his butt and throws it into the bushes. “What if it knocks me out too? I think I feel tired!” Steele stumbles on the ground.

“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 lies face up on the side of the pool trying to recover his breath.

The dog is whimpering and swimming circles in the pool. The Doberman is paddling slower and slower.

“Ah, Steele, we have a problem,” says Wolfe.

Steele raises up 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 bows his head.

“What? Wolfe Neilson, action star. You were in the ocean movie, *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 can’t get over the edge of the pool and is going to pass out.”

“Look it’s sinking!”

“All right!!!” Steele jumps into the pool again and swims towards the dog. He grabs it under the shoulders, dragging it to the shallow end of the pool. He looks at the dog while swimming.

“Hope you remember this dog the next time you want to take a bite out of my backside.” He drags the almost comatose dog to the side and pushes its heavy body onto the edge.

“What do they feed you here, small children?” He looks over to Wolfe who eyes are frozen with panic.

“What’s wrong, I saved the damn dog?”

Steele turns his head into the drooling teeth of an angry Doberman. He falls back into the pool. The Doberman looks over at the sprawled pose of the sleeping dog. He licks the other Doberman’s face as if to try to revive it.

“Oh hell, doggie’s got an uglier brother.”

“Don’t you watch the movies, these dogs always come in pairs,” whispers Wolfe, not wanting to alert the second dog to his position on the other side of the pool.

“Don’t I watch the movies?” he mimics, he splashes the water in frustration.

“Shoot the dam dog would you?” Wolfe readies to aim the gun as Steele thinks twice. “Wait give me the gun this time.” Wolfe throws him the gun. Steele yawns, “maybe the dart is having an effect on me.” He takes aim, his eyelids flicker and he pulls the trigger and fires just as the dog leaps into the pool. The dart goes flying into the bushes. Steele starts paddling.

“Wolfe, I need another dart!” as he swims towards the other side with the dog swimming after him.

“I can’t, that was the last one!”

Steele jumps out of the pool with the dog in hot pursuit.

“Tree,” Wolfe yells and points as the two of them dash up a tree away from the house and pool. They climb and the dog leaps just missing Steele.

“Wow, he almost ate my foot. Hell his mouth is bigger than my foot.”

The dog growls, and hunches its front feet down with its back in a defensive arch.

“Great, now what are we going to do, wait until he goes to sleep? I wouldn’t mind taking a few winks right now anyway,” yawns Steele as he lies down on the branch. Wolfe punches him awake.

“Don’t go to sleep! 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 hits Steele in frustration. Steele punches back. The two of them push each other knocking themselves down a limb. The dog jumps between them narrowly missing its mark with his jaws as it falls back down to the ground.”

“This is getting us nowhere.” Wolfe thinks. “Wait, didn’t Hamesh give us a backup?” Steele checks his vest.

“He did. He didn’t say what it was, but at this point if it helps, I don’t care.” Steele pulls out a small pack the size of a plastic test tube. He removes the plastic seal and the contents of the tube smell 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 sniffs it and throws it through the tree branches where it lands on the ground. There is the sound of air rushing into a small opening and the contents of the tube immediately inflate into a life size Doberman pinscher. Steele shakes his head, ‘If that’s the big Plan B, we’re screwed!’”

“Wait,” Wolfe yells. “Look.” The dog gets a whiff of the meat smell and looks into the eyes of the still Doberman doll. The dog backs down from the tree and forms an aggressive stance looking at the inflatable dog. The dog senses the other dog as a competitor and matches up against him.

“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 jump down and dash towards the service entrance. They push up against the house wall, breathless. Steele takes a whiff of his fingers.

“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 pulls it out from his utility belt “Watch this, I’ve been practicing. I can cut through the glass in ten seconds straight.”

Wolfe puts on the torch goggles and turns on the acetylene, ready to cut.

“Wolfe!”

“What?” He turns his head.

“The screen door is open.” Steele slides the door open. Wolfe turns off the torch.”

“I never get to use the cool toys.”

They cross the threshold and enter a receiving area for kitchen supplies. Wolfe approaches a door that leads into the kitchen. He has the spy ear over his right ear and motions to Steele that he doesn't hear any sounds coming from the kitchen.

"I don't know why you get to wear the spy ear?" complains Steele.

"We already discussed it. My secret agent roles give me the most experience..." he is distracted as he opens the kitchen door and a red light flashes from the doorframe to signify the alarm has been triggered.

"Crap," yells Wolfe, "Now make the call or security will call here first and alert Vansome."

"All right, I'm ready." Steele composes himself and touches 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 asks.

Steele prepares his best Vansome voice. "Yes, this is Blaze Vansome in Beverly Hills on Shoreview. One of my associates," Steele looks over at Wolfe, "has accidentally triggered the alarm and I called to cancel it."

"Your password please," the security attendant asks.

"Yes, my password is 'I'm number one'," Steele rolls 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 to send a car down."

Steele freezes and then thinks. He raises 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 the interruption that your security men will create. If you do send a car down, I will cancel my service with TriCorp and blame it on, what's your name?"

Ah...Benson, sir"

"Benson, I have confirmed the false alarm and my password with you, I will consider this matter closed. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, sir. It's just a matter of procedure, sir. We do it for your own security."

"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 closes the phone and Wolfe slaps 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,” replies Steele. “Let’s go.”

They enter the kitchen and turn into the main foyer. The hallway is long and foreboding. They round a corner to a large oak door.

“According to the security map, his office is right here.” The door is unlocked and as they enter, Wolfe’s flashlight dances around the walls. Steele leans up against the wall and closes his eyes.

“Don’t fall asleep,” Wolfe hits Steele again. Steele tries to stay alert.

“I won’t be sleepy if you weren’t such a bad aim! What the hell are we looking for again?” demands Steele.

“Papers, documents, anything 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 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 start searching the room. Steele looks through some papers on the desk. He stops searching.

“I’ve got it!” He holds up a piece of paper.

“What does it say?” asks Wolfe.

“It says I’m a very bad actor and I am responsible for a lot of bad movies.”

“Be serious for a minute and find something.”

“If he has anything of interest, it’s probably in a safe. Isn’t it on the map?”

“No, just security alarms and house schematics. Must be a different contractor who put the safe in.”

“Great, let’s ask Vansome to show us where he puts all of his incriminating papers.” He looks at the couch. “I think I’m going to lie down for a minute.” He cuddles up on the couch. Wolfe kicks him off the couch and Steele thumps to the floor.

“Ow, did you have to do that?”

“Do you want to wake up to the face of Vansome or one of his bodyguards?”

Steele shudders. “That’s a nightmare,” he shakes his head, “all right, that image woke me up.”

“Shut up, did you hear something?” Wolfe looks around.

“I don’t know. You’re got the spy ear on.”

They both stop moving and shut off their flashlights. They hear the approach of footsteps in the hallway.

“Quick, hide!”

They both stumble around; Wolfe and Steele both race behind the couch and bump their heads as they go underneath. The door opens and a crack of light shines in from the hallway. They both look up from under the couch, watching the person enter the room. As the door opens, a hand touches the wall and the light switch goes on. Vansome enters with a purposeful walk. He steps behind his desk and grabs a female statue by the breast. The breast moves right in his hands. A panel in the floor opens revealing a safe.

“Classy,” Steele whispers.

Vansome approaches the floor and turns the tumblers to open the safe. He pulls out several legal looking documents and ledgers.

“They better be happy with these,” says Vansome. He closes the panel and walks back to the door. He is about to shut off the light when he stops and sniffs the air.

“Why does it smell like ground beef in here?”

Wolfe and Steele look at each other. Steele tries to sit on his hands to prevent the smell from spreading around the room. Vansome takes a step towards the couch. He turns to look behind the armrest.

“Hey boss, are you ready with the papers?” a voice from the hallway yells.

“I’m bringing them,” he heads out the door and turns off the light. The sound of a hand slapping someone’s face rings down the hall.

“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 opens and closes and the sound of feet on gravel grows distant.

Wolfe and Steele get up and go over to the window of the office. Vansome is walking to the door of a stretch limo with two dark figures standing on either side of the limo doors. The one-way mirror window rolls down but it is too dark to see the interior.

“What do you think that’s all about?” asks Steele.

“I have a feeling whatever incriminating papers we need are in that car,” answers Wolfe.

“Great, we spent all this time trying to get into the house. Any ideas how we’re going to get by that dog on the way out?” asks Steele.

Vansome watches the window roll up and the two-armed men step into the car. The gates open and the limo drives out. Crash and Burn walk up to Vansome from the side.

“What was all that about, Blaze?” asks Burn.

“Our partner doesn’t trust me on matters of our business plan.”

“Why didn’t you just say no?”

Vansome gives 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 looks at his two bodyguards.

“Will you two go shut those dogs up? They’re 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,” adds Crash.

“Check it out and then call security to make sure there’s been no security breaches.

Suddenly the Doberman comes out of the bushes with the torn up inflatable dog in its mouth. Its head is shaking furiously as it continues ripping and pulling it apart. Vansome looks at the toy and looks at the house in a panic. Then he turns back to Crash and Burn in a fury.

“How many times have I told you not to give toys to the dogs?” He slaps both of them. “Get rid of that toy.”

Vansome goes back into the house.

“Why did you give the toy to T-bone?” Crash yells 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 starts to snarl at them.

“Here, boy,” yells Crash. T-bone runs back into the bushes with his treasure.

Wolfe and Steele jump down from the wall and land on the street outside of Blaze’s home. They rush to their car.

“All right, what’s the plan?” asks Steele.

“Let’s follow the limo and see where it takes us. By then we can figure out a way to get those papers.”

“Think they drove by yet?”

“If I know Vansome, he’ll still be talking about himself, we have time.”

Wolfe revs the engine and pulls up to the main entrance. The gates open and the limo drives out heading towards Rodeo Drive. Wolfe steers the car slowly behind them.

“Can you tail these guys without being noticed?” Steele asks.

“Ah come on. Didn’t you see me in my movie *The Driver*? I was the invisible man of car drivers, at night it will be much easier for me to blend in.” The limo rounds a corner while Wolfe stops at a stoplight.

“They’re disappearing, while we’re 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.” Their light turns green and they continue pursuit.

“You’re a real pro, Wolfe. What’s your secret?”

Wolfe points his forefinger at his head.

“Concentration. 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, a white limo goes by.

“Wolfe this is Beverly Hills, every other car is a stretch limo!”

“Okay, I’ll speed up!” He accelerates to close in on their quarry.

The lights of Beverly Hills shine in the early morning sky as the nightlife is just beginning. They drive through the main streets of Beverly Hills seeing more expensive cars per capita than any place in the world. They turn down Rodeo Drive and meet the nightlife noise of partyers and revellers who can afford twenty-dollar drinks. The stretch limo in the distance pulls over in front of an Italian restaurant. Wolfe and Steele park on a side street well back. Two large Mafioso’s get out of the limo first, scouting the area out.

“Who do you think is going to come out of the backseat, The Godfather?” Wolfe says 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 both stare across the street and watch a man in a green suit with short-cropped blond hair open the back door. One leg pulls out followed by another long shapely leg that goes on forever. As she steps out, an elegant business suit compliments her slender legs. Her body is voluptuous with long black hair pulled back into a bun. Her mouth is pulled back in a frown as she yells something uncomplimentary to her driver. Her looks can kill. She points at the door as her entourage enters the restaurant.

“Wow, the mafia sure has changed,” comments Steele.

“She’s beautiful!”

“And deadly, don’t let her beauty fool you. She’s a rattlesnake ready to strike.”

“Call me a snake charmer, let’s go in.” Wolfe jumps out of the car and walks towards the restaurant. Steele chases and pulls 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?” asks Steele.

Wolfe smiles.

The restaurant is about one-third full. The smell of fresh pasta permeates through the air. The kitchen is open to the restaurant as a chef is stirring a pot of tomato sauce. The Italian flag is flown patriotically from the ceiling as famous movies posters of Italian descent hang on the walls. Wolfe and Steele are sitting at the bar by a piano. They watch a waiter walk over to the Mafioso table that sits on an upper level above the other patrons. The waiter shows a bottle of wine at the table to the businesswoman and then points back at Wolfe and Steele. Wolfe toasts his glass back to her while Steele pounds his fist on the bar.

“This is stupid, let’s shake those guys up. She’ll give us answers after her boys are lying on the floor,” commands Steele.

“Relax, show some class,” Wolfe smiles towards 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 grabs Wolfe, “We’re not in a movie, if we screw up, we’re dead!”

“Keep your cool and we’ll get through this. Let a good bottle of wine,” he points to the bottle on the wall, “be the solution to our problems.”

One of the suits stands up and signals them to come over. Wolfe stands and strides over to the table with Steele in tow. Before they get to the upper landing, they are motioned to stop as two gorillas in suits come down to them to frisk for weapons. One of them is the blond-haired man in the green suit. They are very thorough in their search.

“How about dinner and movie first, if you’re going to get this close.” Wolfe jokes.

“I dare you to get them angry. Make fun of their Italian roots,” says Steele. The blond hair green suit looks at Steele in the eyes. He does not look Italian.

“What are you, a mafia want-to-be?” The suit stands at the edge of the stairs preventing Steele and Wolfe from joining their host. Wolfe approaches 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 returns a cold stare. “The question is do you know who I am?”

“Well, our mutual friend Blaze Vansome recommended us to come see you,” Wolfe replies.

“I find that hard to believe. He hates your guts.”

“You do know him. Maybe friend is too strong a word, I guess colleague is more the correct term.”

“I doubt he would mention the name Julia Sembrodi to you.”

“Julia, such a beautiful name, mind if we join you for supper?” Wolfe tries to sit down at the table and is 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 says curtly.

Steele looks over at Wolfe. “What if the question was, can I have two famous action stars leave empty-handed?” Steele replies.

She laughs. “You’re cut from the same cloth as Vansome, full of yourself.”

“There’s no need to insult us like that,” Wolfe answers.

Sembrodi continues talking. “Vansome and I have a business arrangement, nothing more. Nothing personal. I make no apologies if my business decisions affect your careers.”

“I’m getting the feeling that she’s not a fan?” Steele nudges Wolfe.

“Let me give you one piece of advice. I have no idea how you came upon my partnership but only your first visit is free. Bother me again and you’ll

never act in another movie.” The man in the green suit puts on a pair of brass knuckles.

“Need any further clarification, mate?” he says with an Australian accent. Both Steele and Wolfe back up a step.

“No, you’ve crystal clear. But there is one problem,” adds Wolfe.

“Problem?” echoes Steele. Wolfe looks Sembrodi straight in the eyes.

“You’re the only thing that stands between us having our careers back. Break this deal with Vansome and we’ll go away.”

“Or else?” Julia seems amused.

“How about I demonstrate?” replies Steele punching his fist in his hand.

“We’ll expose your stronghold tactics to the police. We have documentation,” Wolfe bluffs. He pretends he has the papers that Blaze gave to Julia tonight. She gets up from the table with coldness in her eyes.

“Don’t make threats you can’t back up.” She looks at the green suit. “Oz, remove them.”

Oz nods his head and motions to two of the goons to accompany the actors out of the restaurant.

“I knew talking was a waste of time!” says Steele. He shakes his head as her men approach. Steele leaps over a table and borrows a cane from an elderly patron. He swings the cane around and smashes the Mafioso in the jaw. The man’s head barely flinches; he gives his head a quick shake and advances. He reaches Steele and is immediately knocked on his butt by a kick to the chest by Wolfe. Steele looks over at Wolfe in a gesture of thanks.

“Don’t let it go to your head, he would have gone for me next,” says Wolfe.

“Come on, you know you love me,” replies Steele.

A fist sails at Steele who ducks and the fist slams into the beam behind him.

Steele punches the goon and sends him flying at Wolfe. He catches him and back fists him in the face, knocking him to the ground. Wolfe looks at Julia.

“Hey, we’ve not just pretty faces here,” as he surveys the two fallen bodies of her men. “Now if your guys have had enough, we’ll call it a night.”

Julia claps her hands. About ten men from several surrounding tables stand up. Obviously the number of men in her family runs deep.

“Remind me not to eat here,” says Wolfe.

Crash!

Steele goes flying out the front pane of glass of the restaurant and crashes on the ground near the limo.

Crack!

Wolfe comes sailing out of the adjacent pane of glass landing next to Steele.

He shakes the glass off of him as he gets up. He looks back at the restaurant.

“Why the hell did you have to send me through the glass! He,” Wolfe points 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 pulls himself up to stand by Wolfe. A couple walk by and watch all the commotion

“The food’s not bad but the service is terrible,” Steele shouts to the couple and they scurry off. Julia and Oz come to the broken front window.

“Let’s finish these mates,” as Oz pulls out his gun from his shoulder holster.

Steele and Wolfe start to back up. Sirens wail from a nearby street.

“No, not the time or place,” she places her hand on the gun to prevent him from shooting. Wolfe can’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 walk down the street away from the restaurant. Steele hits Wolfe.

“Why the hell did you say that to her? She’ll come after us now!”

“I’m counting on it. She’s a businesswoman. If we have something she wants then she’ll come to us to negotiate.” He taps 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 answers.

They jump into Wolfe’s convertible and drive off towards Westwood.

Julia sees them leave in the convertible and looks over 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 smiles.

“Make it fatal,” Julia answers.

Chapter Eleven

Speed

Westwood Boulevard—Denny’s Restaurant 4 a.m.

“That went better than expected,” says Wolfe as he finishes a plateful of greasy eggs and bacon.

Steele hits 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 has 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 too much.”

“You can’t listen to good advice if I beat you the side of the head with it.”

The waitress comes towards them and stands by Wolfe. “Anything else I can get you this morning?” She winks at Wolfe.

“I think you’ve handled all my food needs.” He winks back. She laughs and moves on to the next table.

Steele looks at Wolfe. “Is there anything female on two legs that you don’t hit on?” he asks.

“Girls 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! You can have her! All she gives is aggravation!”

“She might look at you if you stop pretending you’re superior all the time. Nobody ever measures up to the great Steele Taylor, do they? Either they’re too weak, too ugly, too stupid...”

“Not true, but there’s always room for improvement.”

“Stop judging everyone and accept their faults. Have some fun.”

“Thanks, remind me to attend your seminars.”

“See, good one, you’re having fun already.”

The two of them climb back into the convertible. Wolfe puts the convertible top on.

“Always been a diner fan?” adds 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?”

“Let’s see if your place is bigger than mine,” Steele replies.

Wolfe pulls out of the parking lot and rounds a residential street to his home. They pass a black Audi, which is coming from the opposite direction.

“We accomplished a lot tonight. We know who caused our movie to shut down. She won’t dare touch us as long as she thinks we have a copy of Vansome’s papers. We have to get those papers from her before she figures out we don’t have them,” explains Wolfe.

“If she hasn’t already put a hit on us. When we get to your place, I’m checking the house from top to bottom. Nobody’s going to get the jump on me!”

“Chill out! You’ve acted in too many movies. Hit men aren’t real and they don’t run around Los Angeles looking for you. Think they’re going to rub us out at a busy intersection?” Wolfe jokes. They pull up to stoplight and stop. The black Audi pulls up next to them.

“No, you’re right, I’m overreacting.”

The Audi’s windows are tinted black; there is no way to see in. A window rolls down and Steele causally looks over as a shotgun aims at their heads.

“Down!” Steele yells and grabs Wolfe’s head and pulls him down as the first shot sails over their heads and through the side window.

“Go!” screams Steele as Wolfe raises his head to steer while Steele pushes on Wolfe’s accelerator foot, squealing the car through the intersection. A second shot causes the back window to explode sending glass everywhere as Wolfe steers onto a main street. The black Audi follows in pursuit. Steele is still down by Wolfe’s legs.

“I think you can get up now,” as Wolfe steers towards a highway overpass. “You’re making me kind of nervous down there,” Wolfe points to his crotch. Steele jumps back in anger.

“How can you joke around, we almost had our heads blown off. Get us to the police!” Wolfe turns onto the interchange for the 405 Highway and sees the black Audi in his rear-view mirror.

“I agree, grab my cell phone from the back seat and call 911 for help.” Steele reaches back and pulls out the phone.

“You mean this phone?” He pulls 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.”

“How about we pull over to the next gas station, make a phone call and tell our friends,” Steele looks back as the black Audi is closing in on them, “to hold off a few minutes while we call the police.”

“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. “I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

“How about you drive like crazy and lose these guys.”

“Brilliant! What would I do without you here to guide me?” Wolfe says sarcastically.

“Hold on, I’m thinking.” The black Audi is closing the gap. “You got any firepower in this heap?”

Wolfe’s eyes brighten up. “We live in LA don’t we? Open the glove compartment.”

Steele reaches in to pull out a 500 Smith and Wesson Magnum. He opens the magazine and spins the barrel.

“Sweet, you like your guns big. Let’s see these mafia boys suck on a few of these.” He loads the gun. The black Audi pulls up closer and a shotgun pulls out of the side window.

Blam! A shotgun shell takes out the back window.

“Jesus, where the hell are LA’s finest when you need them?”

“You could drive by a donut stand.”

“Will you take a shot at them. Blast the windshield or tires out.”

“No problem.”

Steele takes aim and takes a point blank shot at the Audi’s windshield.

Bing! The bullet ricochets off the windshield.

“What the hell!”

He takes another shot at the hood to hit the engine.

Ping! The bullet bounces off.

“What did you buy, rubber bullets?” He empties the magazine on the Audi with no effect. Steele bangs the gun on the dashboard in frustration.

“Dam it, our mafia pals must have a bulletproof car. I can’t slow them down.”

“Never mind, we got worse problems ahead,” Wolfe points in front of them.

“What can be worse than gun happy goons chasing us?” asks Steele still fiddling with the gun. “I hate this.” He drops several bullets under the seat. “I never had to reload in the movies.”

“How about gun happy goons in front of us! Look!” Steele looks up.

A black hummer is parked on a highway overpass. Several men stand with rifles in hand while two more are tying rope lines.

“What the hell are they doing?”

Steele starts to realize they are caught in a trap.

“Duck,” he yells.

Two men dressed in paratrooper uniforms take a running jump off the opposite side of the overpass and use the momentum to come sailing out from below with guns blaring directly at the car. Their bullets riddle the hood. As the gunmen pass overhead, Steele raises his head and takes aim. He shoots one of the paratroopers who goes limp but misses the second who remains firing. Steele screams at Wolfe.

“What the hell! You said that they wouldn’t come after us and now it’s World War Three!”

“All right, 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.”

“No one put a gun to your head!”

Steele gets a brainstorm and points 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!”

He points the gun at Wolfe who presses the brake and the car lurches to a stop.

“Don’t move!” Steele yells.

The black Audi whizzes by exposing the gunmen in the window. Steele takes aim and a bullet whizzes by Wolfe and hits the gunman causing him to drop the shotgun and his body collapses. Another hand drags 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 looks behind him. The black hummer drives off the overpass followed by two black vans and is closing distance between them and their convertible.

“Drive!” yells Steele

Wolfe screeches his tires and accelerates towards the black Audi in the distance.

“The odds just got decidedly in their favour, what do we do?”

Steele rubs his chin, trying to think. “We got to outlast them, we got at least five to ten minutes before the cops have to respond. 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 comes to a screeching stop ahead and turns sideways to semi-block the highway. A new gunman has replaced the one that was shot. Both vans open up side doors with rifles. They continue to gain distance.

“Wolfe, take this exit, now!” Steele grabs the wheel and forces Wolfe to make a sharp turn to barely make the off ramp.

“I am the driver! Keep an eye on our friends,” Wolfe yells.

“You’re welcome, I just made sure we didn’t get our faces shot off.”

“I’m getting the distinct feeling we’re 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 follows the convertible up the off ramp. At the top, the two black vans turn 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 sees several long warehouses in the distance and drives towards them.

“What’s the plan? I’ve got two bullets left and we have an army chasing us with a enough firepower to take over a small city,” Steele asks.

“Did you ever see my movie *The Impossible Escape* where I break out of prison and I’m on the run from the police?”

“I must have missed that one. What did you do?”

“Watch this.” Wolfe drives towards the warehouses.

Several minutes later, one of the black vans comes around the corner of a warehouse. The driver sees the convertible with Wolfe and Steele looking back towards him. The van accelerates in close pursuit. Wolfe speeds up and remains ahead of the van twisting around buildings on the pier. The

convertible turns 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 posts prop the chain high enough off the ground for a low car to drive under. As Wolfe drives his convertible under the chain, he pulls the post off the ground. Steele opens up his door and grabs his post on his right. The chain drops down lower with more slack but is now too low for a vehicle to drive under. The van sees the chain at the last second and but the occupants have no time to react. The chain binds itself to the undercarriage slamming the van to a stop. The van's rear end goes vertical and two bodies comes flying out of the van's windshield. Wolfe slams on the brakes and circles the convertible back to the accident.

"We need some firepower. See what these guys are packing," says Steele.

Wolfe stops the convertible near the wreckage and Steele steps out and tentatively approaches the van. He steps over the bodies and pulls the side door open on the van. There are no other passengers but boxes of weapons.

"We got grenades!" Steele says from inside the van.

"Hurry up and grab them, we don't have much time," answers Wolfe.

Steele comes out of the van with a box full of grenades and comes to face to face with a not so dead gunman. He curses himself for not checking the men on the pavement. It may be his last mistake.

"Movie's over!" the gunman points his gun at Steele. A shot explodes and a bullet rips into flesh. Steele grabs his chest; he feels very serene. "I never thought it would feel like this," he thinks. He takes his hand away from his chest expecting blood but sees nothing. The gunman falls to the ground with a fresh bullet hole gaping through his chest. Wolfe has his gun straddled over the back seat with his gun pointing at the van.

"You saved my life," says Steele.

"Don't remind me! Good thing you didn't use those last two bullets." The other van is approaching in the distance.

"Let's go."

They climb into the car as the other van comes to a screaming stop behind the first van. They fire shots, missing the convertible. Because the chain is still intact, they are unable to pursue.

"Listen, I want to tell you something."

"Can this wait, we kind of have a situation here," comments Wolfe.

"I got to get this off my chest now, because I might not get to later. I know sometimes I can come off as a bit of a jerk."

Steele gets a look from Wolfe.

“All right, a big jerk, to a lot of people. I’m not just taking it out on you.”

“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 is silent.

“Right, Steele?”

Steele laughs “Of course.”

“You’re almost human at times like this.”

“And when you’re sober, you’re almost bearable.”

“Touché.”

“Now your chain trap reminds me of a stunt I pulled in one of my movies. Want to try it?”

“I’m all ears.”

Several minutes later Wolfe is driving alone in the convertible. The second van is rapidly approaching in the opposite direction. Wolfe guns the accelerator towards the van in a classic game of chicken. The van speeds up. A rifle extends from one of the van’s windows. Wolfe’s head in the driver’s seat is almost in the sights of the rifle’s scope. The shooter aims and a finger tugs on the trigger. Wolfe turns the car ninety degrees down another warehouse lane while the van passes the lane and comes to a screeching stop. The van backs up and turns down the laneway, giving chase.

High above the roadway on the metal scaffolding along the pier, Steele climbs up into the rafters with a bundle of grenades. He holds them precariously and almost loses his balance. A gunshot from the van at Wolfe distracts Steele’s attention and he drops one of the grenades to the ground. Steele closes his eyes, expecting the grenade to explode on impact.

Bonk! It bounces harmlessly on the ground below and tumbles to the side of the laneway. Steele starts breathing again. Wolfe drives below narrowly missing running over the grenade. The van follows behind in hot pursuit. Steele looks down at his hands; a huge wad of duct tape is wrapped around five grenades. Steele watches the advancing van, pulls one pin out of a grenade and drops the bundle. The grenades fall through the air, racing the van to its shadow on the laneway. The bundle lands on the roof rack of the van and lodges itself on the passenger’s side. The van skids to a stop and turns sideways. A goon slides the door open and stands on the edge of the van to look onto the roof. His hand feels around the top of the van and finds the bundle. He steps out of the van and sees the grenades. Before he can react, the

grenades explode. The concussive force sends the van and occupants into the air. The blast sends the van off the edge of the pier into ocean. The fiery remains burn on the water's surface.

Wolfe turns the convertible around the corner as Steele drops down from his perch. Wolfe picks up the grenade that dropped as Steele approaches the car.

"You missed one," he tosses it Steele. "How did you keep them all together?"

"Amazing what you can do with a little duct tape."

Steele jumps into the car.

"Still got some grenades left?" Wolfe asks Steele.

"You bet."

"Good, we're going to need them!"

The sound of gunfire riddles off the metal warehouse beams behind them. The black Audi approaches, gaining ground quickly. Several fresh bullet holes find their way into in the trunk of the convertible. Wolfe slams the accelerator to the floor.

"I'm still holding out for the cops to show."

"Well, don't look over there."

As they drive down the pier, they can see through the open warehouse the black hummer with a machine gun 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 closes 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 is coming to an end with only two exits; cross and meet the hummer or turn around and meet the Audi. Wolfe does the only thing he can think of, he speeds up.

"What the hell? Slow down or we're going off the dock into the ocean!"

Wolfe looks at Steele as if to say, *So?*

"I was afraid you would go insane without having a drink."

"Hold on!"

The car hits the barrier at the end of the pier and flies into the air. The engine revs as the wheels spin with no friction from the ground. The car leaps across to reach the pier on the other side.

Kaboom! The convertible never makes it. It slams in a container trailer hanging from a crane. The car explodes on impact and the debris falls 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, steps out of the hummer. He goes to the edge of a pier and looks into the ocean. The water swallows the last of the car. His foot kicks on some debris on the pavement. He bends down and picks up the hood ornament from the convertible. Oz smiles.

“Looks like you took a long walk off a short pier,” he drawls with his Australian accent. He flips open his cell phone and hits redial.

“It’s Oz, those blokes are done. We gave them a burial at sea,” he pauses, listening to the other end. He spies a crow on a light post looking down at him. “Am I sure they’re dead?” He pulls out a boomerang from his suit pocket and throws it at the crow. It swirls through the air ready to deliver death. The crow yells, followed by thud and feathers on the ground. The boomerang returns to his left hand. “Do I ever make mistake on death?” He laughs at Julia’s answer. “There aren’t enough remains to return a trophy. Those mates won’t be making any more bad movies. We’re coming in.” He closes the cell phone and motions to the Audi to leave and for the gunman to get back into the hummer.

“Movie stars.” He shakes his head. “There’ll be no sequel.” He throws the hood ornament into the water. Oz gets into the Hummer and the vehicles drive off.

The ocean water twirls into a whirlpool with the car dragging itself to the bottom of the harbour. Bits of debris and flames from the gas burn on the surface. Shadows appear over the water as Wolfe and Steele look 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 with it. I pulled the same stunt in my movie, *Moscow Invasion*. You have to scout your area and use misdirection to focus their attention. He shakes his hands and a coin appears at Steele’s ear from Wolfe’s hand.

“Cheap trick. Don’t give up your day job,” Steele replies.

“But effective. They were so focused on the car they didn’t look anywhere else.”

“I was nervous jumping out of the car at the last second and hiding in that dumpster,” he points 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 them watch our movies.”

Wolfe looks puzzled for a second and then considers Steele’s words.

“You’re right, good thing you didn’t say that to me before we jumped.”

They move away from the crash site and start walking down the laneway travelling further from the accident. “I’m insulted that organized crime doesn’t watch my movies.”

“Don’t, or neither one of us would have survived with our stunts,” consoles Steele. Wolfe stops as he hears sirens in the distance. Steele throws up his arms.

“Finally the cops show up. I can’t wait to explain the whole story to them and get their protection.” Wolfe pauses and grabs 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 looks 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 were 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?” asks Steele. “We don’t actually have faces that can hide.”

“I’ve got an idea! He’s not my first choice but he’ll give us good advice.”

“Who do you have in mind?” wonders Steele in surprise.

Pang’s face is a picture of tranquility as he mediates in a small temple illuminated by candles in the morning sun. His home is nestled in Malibu Hills, hidden from view and isolated in the woods; still he is only minutes away from the lunacy that is Los Angeles. It is a one-story ranch style home with a rock garden surrounded by immaculately groomed shrubs. Connected to the house is an Asian temple with a roof but only two walls. Pang sits in the center of the temple; his legs are crossed in a lotus position. He dabs his fingers into a plate of oil and chants under his breathe a language only spoken

by ancient healers. He makes finger movements through the air as if spelling the words out of some obscure language. Shadows stretch along the path in the morning sun. Pang turns to his right as a hand reaches over to cover his mouth.

He calmly grabs the fingers and twists them down, bringing Steele to the floor.

“Let go! I wanted to see if I could sneak up on you,” he struggles 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.”

“Go big, or go home,” Steele shrugs.

“Which brings you to my home...unannounced,” Pang sternly responds.

“We need your help,” pleads Wolfe.

“Continue.”

“After the movie was shut down, we went to see the financial backer to change his mind.”

“Someone was pressuring him to pull his support,” interjects Steele.

“Two nights ago we fought with Blaze Vansome during our *dress* rehearsal. Thinking it was him, we decided to break into his house.”

“Obviously,” responds 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 screws up his face on the word violent.

“She’s had a business arrangement with Vansome to shut our picture down.”

“And Julia Sembrodi is all business!”

“She took papers from Vansome’s house that will prove her illegal tactics.”

Pang holds up his hand to signify an end to the story and a chance for him to talk.

“So you dealt with her in a professional manner to change her mind?” he inquires. Both look at each other and with some hesitation. Wolfe responds.

“Our first meeting didn’t go well. Her goon squad tried to kill us and now she thinks we’re dead. We’re worried to go to the police in case she has connections on the force.”

“Interesting theory. Why come to me?” Steele and Wolfe look at each other uncomfortably waiting for the other to continue.

“You’re a good teacher and we hoped you’d have a rational suggestion on our next step,” Wolfe replies.

“And what would I receive in return?”

Silence. Neither one of them expected this reply.

“Pang, you didn’t strike us as the materialistic type. We’re not flush with money, but we can pay you with the balance after production,” answers Steele.

Pang stands and shakes his head with disapproval.

“Disappointing. Once again you have put your values on what I want. Did you learn nothing from my training?” Wolfe looks at Steele and then back to Pang.

“Whoa, relax, Pang. It’s a pretty universal to think you want money for assistance. I’m sure this house wasn’t built on wisdom and good fortune. Why don’t you tell us what you want?” Pang paces around the two of them.

“Very well, for my assistance, I require one thing from the both of you.”

“Yes,” they answer together.

“Something from here,” he points to his brain to signify knowledge.

“That leaves Steele out,” laughs Wolfe.

“Enough,” answers Steele. “No riddles, Pang, what does this,” he points to his head, “mean?” Pang slowly walks 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 were we supposed to learn from your exercises?”

“Pang, I don’t understand your teaching, but I did appreciate your effort.” Wolfe bows his head to Pang as a sign of respect.

“Me too,” Steele bows 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?” asks Pang.

“It makes me as uncomfortable as hell.”

“I wanted to punch you in the nose!”

Pang looks at both of them. “Stop! You are making the same mistakes. Start concentrating. Think about your experiences. What did you learn from them?”

Both men are silent, then Steele speaks.

“It was embarrassing to wear a dress, but it didn’t compare to the life of the young girl. Being slugged by her boyfriend made my own problems look small.”

“The kid, George, had emotional baggage the size of a mountain. My baggage is more like a mole hill.”

“Again. What did these situations teach you?” Pang looks hopefully.

“Despite my complaining, there is always someone worse off.”

“Even with my drinking problem, I’ve got the money to fight it. A lot of people don’t have that or friends to help them. Even jackass Steele helped clean up my act.”

“This *jackass* may not have any real friends, but competing with Wolfe forced me to stop focusing on myself.”

“Is the lesson to stop dwelling on our problems...” begins Wolfe.

“And help others even if there is no benefit?” Steele adds.

Pang stands still, looking at the two of them with emotionless eyes. Then he claps, loud and slowly.

“Very good! Finally both of you realize that you are not the centers of the universe. Others exist outside of your lives with problems that eclipse your own. Begin life’s journey by looking outside of your own needs.”

Steele and Wolfe look 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 hangs open in disbelief. He turns and punches Wolfe in the shoulder.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why didn’t I? Hey, I’m just as shallow as you,” Wolfe replies. He turns to face Pang. “Okay, we learned your lesson. Have we earned your help?”

Pang nods his head.

“What should we do? This woman is connected. If we go to the police, there’s a good chance someone on her payroll will kill us before we prove her guilt.” Pang wanders the deck of the dojo and looks out to 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 dead and the next time we make a mistake with her, we’re not coming back. Where would she hide them?”

“Could we ask Hamesh to find her home?” suggest Steele.

“What is Hamesh?” Pang asks.

“A knowledgeable friend,” Wolfe looks over to Steele, “call him up and see if he can find her.” In the corner of the dojo sits a modern end table with a few books and a cordless phone. Steele steps over to pick up the phone. Pang turns his back to the two of them.

“Once again the answer stares you straight in the face,” Pang responds.

Both look at the phone.

“Is someone going to call us with the answer?” Wolfe remarks.

Steele looks at the phone and then the book underneath. He grabs the phone book. “Of course, she’s a business woman. She would keep everything at her office. There must be an address.” He searches and flips through the pages and stops.

“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 flashes a rare smile as he stands up and grabs his cane. “With the proper planning anything can be accomplished. Remember difficult does not mean impossible. He points his cane at a piece of paper. “This is what you’ll need.”

The morning is a series of preparations. More money transactions with Hamesh as they provide him with a list of equipment. Hamesh is happy to help especially when money is involved. He delivers the necessary supplies to Pang’s home. In the package he drops off, is a full schematic of Sembrodi’s office tower. The building is a twenty-two floor architectural marvel recently built with the latest security measures. Julia Sembrodi’s office is on the top floor. Pang points to a number of places on the schematic of the building and together they plan a way for them to enter.

Pang insists on one final exercise before they tackle the building. Steele and Wolfe enter the back yard and look up into the face of a twenty-foot plank wall. The wall is imposing with no handholds and resembles the training wall used by the marines. It is formed like a three-sided rectangle with the long side five feet wide with two feet wide sides extending to the top. The C shape of the wall rises high above the yard to the top of palm trees. The wood is grey from age with many knots and rough to touch. Splinters are guaranteed from running your hand against the grain. Each plank is an inch thick and there is a 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,” exclaims 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.” Pang commands.

Wolfe looks around. “Where’s the rope?”

Without missing a beat, Pang replies, “There is no rope.”

“How the hell am I supposed to get over, FLY?”

“You could drink a few beers and then you’ll think you can float over it,” grins Steele.

“Use your mind,” persuades Pang.

“He’ll get far on that,” says Steele.

“Here goes nothing,” Wolfe takes a running leap at the wall getting about eight feet up and falling back to the ground on his butt.

“Graceful,” adds Steele.

Wolfe wipes the dirt off his pants. “Show us how it’s done, fly boy,” gestures Wolfe.

“Give me a boost, I think Pang wants us to help each other.” Pang remains expressionless as Wolfe bends on one knee and cups his hands to lift Steele.

“It’s not going to be enough, the wall’s too tall,” Wolfe grunts.

“Let me try, maybe I can find a handhold,” Steele reaches for the top of the wall but is still about five feet too short.”

“You’re getting heavy!” yells Wolfe.

“Okay, let me down. I can’t reach the top.” He jumps down.

“Any more good ideas, partner?” Wolfe pushes Steele back against the perpendicular wall that comes out from the edge of the main climbing wall.

“I don’t see you coming up with any brainstorms either, action star,” Steele pushes back and Wolfe bumps into the opposite perpendicular lip. Wolfe pushes Steele against the wall pressuring them both against the sidewalls. Steele stops first.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I was thinking of blowing up the wall and stepping over the debris but this might work.”

“Let do it!”

Minutes later, climbing back to back facing away from each other; they use the other’s force to grip against the opposite wall. They have inched halfway up the height of the wall, pushing against the other man to brace against their own side wall. Each pushes with all of their might to climb higher and to cause as much discomfort to the other.

“I hope we get up soon, your back is killing me,” strains Wolfe.

“Watch me pull a muscle now and screw up everything.”

“You want cheese with that wine?”

Wolfe’s hand suddenly grabs air as they reach the top of their challenge.

“Look, we did it!” They peer over the wall.

“Congratulations! The two of you worked together to climb the obstacle. You are ready for your bigger challenge. You may descend,” commands Pang. Neither man moves as they look off into the distance.

“Is something wrong?” Pang asks.

“Just the opposite,” answers Steele, “did you know there is a hot tub next door?”

“Pang, your neighbour is hot!” Wolfe drools.

Pang just shakes his head as he walks away. Unfortunately from their vantage point, they can’t see Pang grinning ear to ear.

The three of them meet inside Pang’s dojo.

“Teamwork will be the success of this operation. Try to go this alone,” Pang looks at Wolfe and Steele, “and you will fail!”

“We understand. You have been a big help. We owe you...”

“BIG TIME,” adds Wolfe.

“Have you ever thought about acting in our movie? If this works out, we can arrange something when we start shooting again.”

Pang shakes his head. “No, thank you. Your movies are too superficial, I wouldn’t cause my family dishonour.”

Both Wolfe and Steele laugh. They face Pang and bow.

“Thanks, Pang,” they say with genuine respect.

They leave with two duffle bags of equipment over their shoulders for their assault. They walk down the pathway through the woods to the roadway.

Pang watches them disappear in the distance. The sun fades and the sky darkens behind a cloud. He picks up the phone and dials quickly. His grin has changed into a frown as he speaks three words into the receiver.

“They’ve leaving now.”

He places the phone in the receiver and suddenly takes the top part of his cane apart revealing a knife. He turns and throws it dead center into a bull’s-eye on the wall.

Chapter Twelve

Die Hard

The huge main lobby of Sembrodi Industries is busy with the hustle of men and women in business suits running to their meetings. Massive glass chandeliers overlook a granite floor with the Sembrodi emblem of a snake welded into the granite floor. Five guards provide the security with metal detectors at all three entrances. It is nearing the end of the day when employees anxiously await for their chance to go home.

Suddenly, the fire alarm goes off. The sound is deafening. The lobby becomes a fevered chaos with office staff spilling out of the stairways and into the main entrance. In the pandemonium, the main door opens as the feet of two dark black fireman boots enter. The firemen pass the door and evade the metal detector as the crowd of people overwhelm security. Steele is twirling the nozzle on his 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,” whispers Wolfe as he adjusts his helmet.

“Relax, I’m just being prepared, Hamesh thought it could be useful,” answers Steele. Wolfe looks at the main lettering at the elevator describing the main office on the twenty-second floor. He motions 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 climb the stairs, keeping their heads down as a sea of people push around them.

A long ten minutes later, two very sweaty faces look through a side door. Steele and Wolfe exit through the stairway door and hunch over from their exertion.

“This...better...be the floor. I can’t climb anymore!” Steele collapses 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 too!”

“Did not!”

An attractive businesswoman walks by stopping the argument. Wolfe recovers first.

“Who cares, let’s go through the main offices. I bet the whole place is deserted by now with the alarm.”

They round 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 gestures across the room, “they’re so intense on their computer screens they didn’t even notice us.”

“The penalty for goofing off must be pretty high,” Steele laughs. “It looks like some serious business is conducted here.”

“Bean counters rule the world. 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 approach, on their right is a glassed-in boardroom with a large table where a number of young executives sit discussing the latest Sembrodi products. A large oak desk sits at the end of the hallway and an attractive secretary sits by the penthouse door.

“I’ll handle this,” says Wolfe as he walks up her. Before he can say a word, she bends down to reach for a pen and shows her ample cleavage. Wolfe smiles.

“Excuse me, we’re with 56th Squadron fire department and we need to investigate each office to determine where the fire started.”

“Certainly,” she purrs, “I’ll always help a man in uniform.” She looks at Wolfe a little more closely. “You remind me of someone,” as she brushes her lips with her finger.

“He gets that all the time,” says Steele.

“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 looks at Wolfe.

“We need to go into the main offices first,” Wolfe gestures to the left of her desk. She shakes her head.

“I’d really like to help,” she plays 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 leans closer to her, “to change your mind?”

She giggles. Steele makes a gagging sound.

“Well, you are firemen and I certainly wouldn’t want the building to burn down, would I?” She presses a button under the desk and the double doors open into a darkened office.

“Don’t be too long or I’ll have to come in after you,” she winks at Wolfe.

“Be back before you know it,” Wolfe motions to Steele to follow.

They enter into the darkness and the doors swing shut behind them.

“Can you turn on a light switch, I can’t see a thing?” Steele asks as he fumbles with a flashlight. Suddenly the shutters on the window swing open illuminating the room blinding both their eyes.

“Let me help. You’ve been expected,” Julia Sembrodi spins around in her chair by the window to face the two. Strong arms on both sides grab Steele and Wolfe and push them down on the floor.

“Stupid actors. Did you really think you could walk into my headquarters undetected to take these?” She slams 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 snarls. Steele clears his throat.

“Do be hasty! You caught us! Call it a draw and we’ll head back downstairs.” Steele tries to turn around. A gun clicks at his temple.

“Or not.”

“You don’t want to kill us and make a mess on your beautiful floor,” remarks Wolfe.

The Australian, Oz, steps from behind them, bends down and pulls up the plastic sheet that is placed over the floor.

“No mess at all mate!”

Steele’s hands are pulled back but he can almost touch the top nozzle with his fingers of the 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,” explains Steele. Oz aims 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.”

“That’s original. Finish them,” Julia orders.

Oz cocks his gun at Steele’s temple. “See you in the movies,” he smirks. At that moment, Steele presses the nozzle on the can and sprays the thug holding him in the eyes. The thug loosens his grip and Steele drops down as Oz fires. Oz shoots his own man.

Wolfe uses the distraction to kick out the knee of his captor and reaches into his fireman’s jacket, throwing two smoke grenades onto the floor. He dives behind the couch as Oz fires. Steele catches the string on the blind and the room goes dark. Gunfire erupts and another thug falls to the floor. Steele puts on his night vision sunglasses. He turns and looks down the barrel of Oz’s gun. Steele blinks and realizes he is still alive. Oz doesn’t realize he has Steele dead to aim. Steele grabs Oz’s gun and fires it at two other goons. They go down as Oz twists the gun away and fires wildly in the darkness at Steele. A bullet whizzes by and grazes Steele in his leg.

“Arrg,” Steele moans. Oz stops and aims at Steele voice. Steele pushes one of the thugs at Oz who empties his pistol into him. Steele hits Oz in the chest and the two of them slam through the door and into the hallway.

In the adjoining glass boardroom, seven executives sit listening to a young woman giving a presentation on Sembrodi camping supplies. On the boardroom table are a number of pots, pans, knives, rope and other camping merchandise. The female executive is tapping her laptop keyboard to flip the next slide for the presentation. There is a bar graph describing sales trends for the products. She continues with her sales analysis.

“In this year’s sales reports, consumers 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 making our brand more violent and alienating our target audience of families?” A nervous looking man with white sideburns interjects.

“Good question, our market research shows that our product’s image is still perfect for the family buyer and indicate few signs of promoting violence.”

Crash!

Steele and Oz come tumbling out of the office, smash through the glass retainer and land on top of the boardroom table. People scatter, leaving the boardroom through the door and broken window. Oz punches Steele in the jaw as he lands on top of him. Steele’s hand reaches for something

underneath and grabs a pot and slams Oz over the head with it. Oz falls off the table and stumbles back and grabs a tent pole and charges at Steele. The female presenter watches the whole scene, frozen into place. Steele grabs a knife with a compass and grins.

“Gotcha,” he yells, brandishing the knife.

Oz smashes the knife with the tent pole, knocking the blade out of the handle of the knife and onto the floor. Steele looks at knifeless handle in disbelief.

“Cheap knife,” as he tosses it towards Oz. The woman scribbles this note down vigorously on her clipboard.

Oz swings the tent pole, missing Steele’s feet as he jumps in the air off the boardroom table. Steele’s head hits the ceiling and pushes two panels, knocking dust into Oz’s eyes. Steele reaches for the tent rope on the floor. Oz smashes him in the back with the pole. Steele is face down on the table; Oz grabs the rope and pulls it taut around Steele’s neck. Steele’s eyes bulge from the lack of oxygen. Before he can pass out, he spies a tent peg. Steele is about to go unconscious when he grasps the peg and he viciously jabs it down into Oz’s foot. Oz screams in agony and releases the rope. Steele kicks him off the table into the corner, knocking the projector screen to the floor. Steele grabs the rope and lashes it around Oz mid-section like roping a steer. As Steele ties the rope, Oz, punches him in the face and it slams him back onto the table. Steele keeps hold of the rope in his left hand. Oz looks at the rope tied around his chest.

“Oy! What the hell are you’re trying to do, mate, become a boy scout?”

He steps forward; Steele kicks Oz back against the wall. As Oz falls down, Steele throws one end of the rope over the ceiling beam. Oz jumps up as Steele is distracted and knocks him down to the end of the table. Steele is hanging off the edge of the table. Oz pulls out a knife.

“Game over, action hero. You lose.” he tries to plunge the knife into Steele stomach. Steele falls back off the table, pulling the rope and pulls Oz up in the air until his head slams into the metal rafter above. Oz is knocked out cold.

“I think the game just reached new heights,” remarks Steele.

The woman comes over to Steele, “Aren’t you...” she starts.

He realizes her recognition of him.

“I am,” he gives a macho pose with his hand on his chin

“Wow, you were fantastic. Is this some kind of movie?”

“Movie? This is your new ad campaign. The slogan is *We’ll take you higher*,” Steele replies as Oz swings in the air. He ties the rope off on the

doorknob to keep Oz airborne. "I'd leave him there," as he passes by her to leave the room.

"You're a real man of action," she remarks. She watches him return to the main office. A co-worker rushes into the boardroom, looking at the mess.

"What the hell happened here?" he sees Oz's unconscious body hanging from the ceiling. "What's up with him?"

"I don't think he liked this year's products," she replies and leaves the room.

In the office, during Steele and Oz's fight in the boardroom, smoke dissipates from Wolfe's grenade and fills the room. Wolfe can see the outline of the desk and spies the papers. He reaches for them. A knife comes down and impales his hand to the desk.

"Nobody touches my business. Nobody!"

Wolfe looks into the cold hard eyes of Julia Sembrodi and screams.

"Ahhh!! Nobody stabs my hand to a desk!"

He punches her in the jaw with his good right arm knocking her out against her chair. She collapses to the floor. He pulls the knife out of his palm and screams in agony. One of the thugs behind him tries to stand, shaking his head to regain his senses. Before he gets up, Wolfe kicks him in the stomach, knocking him out.

"Give me your tie," he pulls the tie of the unconscious man and wraps it around his bleeding hand.

"I hate suits!" he yells to a room of bodies lying on the floor. "I never got hurt in the movies!" he looks down at his bloodied hand. He grabs the papers and puts them into his duffle bag and marches out the door. He sees Steele leaving the boardroom.

"You're still alive, I've got the papers."

"Good job, what the hell happened to your hand?" Steele points to the wrapped bloody tie. Steele limps down the hallway.

"I got stabbed. Why are you limping?" asks Wolfe.

"I got shot. Let's get out of here before reinforcements."

They head to the banks of elevators. They seem operational now and the alarm is no longer blaring. Wolfe presses the elevator down button. The doors open and about five guns point at Wolf. Security has arrived from the lobby.

"Oh shit," says Steele.

Wolfe looks at the tallest of the security guards who easily dwarfs his height. He sighs 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 put their guns into their holsters and the big security guard radios downstairs.

“Possible guns fired on top floor, will investigate.”

Four of the five guards proceed ahead but the largest one remains behind.

“Great work, we have to check on more fire alarms,” smiles Wolfe.

They step into the elevator and the door is about to close when the security guard notices a gun sticking out of Wolfe’s duffle bag. The guard draws his gun as the doors are closing. The guard radios back to the others.

“I have visual on the gunmen! Need assistance at elevator doors now!” His hand stops the doors from closing. Steele hits the security guard’s arm knocking his gun to the floor. The elevator doors open, the other guards are racing down the hallway with their guns drawn. Wolfe pulls the security guard into the elevator and against the wall as Steele closes the door. Bullets drill into the outside door.

“Good friends you have, they could have shot you,” Steele says to the guard as he smashes him in the jaw. The guard dives for the gun. Wolfe kicks it back to Steele. The guard hits him in the chest and up against the elevator door.

“This hurts more than the elevator music,” moans Wolfe.

Steele grabs the gun and points it at the guard. Wolfe yells at Steele while fighting off the security guard.

“Don’t shoot him, he’s just doing his job! Besides any bullets will probably ricochet off the walls and kill us.”

Wolfe jumps onto the shoulders of the guard. The guard stands up smashing Wolfe’s head on the ceiling

“Owww!” Steele, hit him!”

Steele hits him in the chest while Wolfe pounds him in the head.

The elevator doors open onto the main lobby floor. The elevator is empty as security guards rush 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 yells into his walkie talkie. His voice gets fainter as he turns around a corner. Wolfe’s head peeks out from the right wall of the elevator. Steele’s head looks out from the left. They brush off debris from their clothes and remove their fire jackets. As they start to walk out, the security guard’s body slumps down into view. Embarrassed, they back up; Wolfe pushes the unconscious body back into the corner while Steele presses

the close button for elevator doors. They start walking out towards the entrance.

“Once were though those lobby doors, we’re safe.”

“If nothing else goes wrong,” says Steele.

“Always the pessimistic. Follow me, we’re on the home stretch.”

“Will you stop bleeding all over the place!”

“Two hundred more feet and we’re out here.”

“What if the guys upstairs have radioed down our description?”

“Oh shit!”

“What?” asks Steele as they round the corner. In front of them is 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,” pleads Wolfe.

Outside the building, Vansome walks with Crash and Burn in tow climbing the main staircase to enter Sembrodi Industries.

“What the hell is going on here?” asks Vansome as he watches people fleeing the building and a fire truck parked on the street.

“Looks like a fire, Blaze.”

“Really, thanks for explaining that to me,” Blaze barks 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?” wonders Crash.

Vansome slaps Crash in the side of the head

“You think too much,” he looks at Burn. “I’ll take care of Sembrodi. You two make sure nothing happens to me.” A person bumps into him and knocks Vansome to the ground.

“Watch where you’re going,” Vansome sneers as the man in the business suit keeps running. “Why aren’t you watching what’s going on,” he yells at the two bodyguards as he picks himself up.

“Idiot!” Blaze brushes the dirt off of his suit. “This is a Pazlo original. Can this day get any worse?”

Blam! Gunfire erupts in the main lobby. The crowd panics while many die down to the floor for protection.

“Stop those two firemen!” The big security guard yells from the elevator doors. He stumbles and advances towards Wolfe and Steele. The crowd disperses leaving them out in the open.

“That gets rid of our crowd problem. Any ideas on how to find a new exit?” asks Steele. The other security guards are pushing through the crowd to get at them.

“Just one,” adds Wolfe. He pulls a clump of plastic explosive from his pouch, clips the engage button and throws it so it sticks to a huge plexiglas window.

“Bomb! Everyone down!” Wolfe yells to all those around him.

The chaos increases in intensity as people panic and run away from them. One security guard draws his gun and takes aim at Steele. Wolfe punches in the trigger.

Boom! The concussive force shatters the plexiglas sending hard glass chunks onto the granite floor. Outside, people are rocked off their feet in surprise including Vansome and his bodyguards. Steele and Wolfe gather their wits seconds after the blast and get on their feet.

“Let’s go!”

They dash out of the broken window into the courtyard. They run over Vansome who is still bent over and picking himself up from the blast. He sees Steele and Wolfe running away. Blaze slaps Burn who is 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 chase after Steele and Wolfe who reach the street. Traffic is congested with commuters and the action stars have to weave in and out of cars honking at their approach.

“Want to drive your car out of here?” inquires 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 looks up and sees a tour bus taking the commuter lane on the street. A huge banner is strapped from end to end on the upper deck with the words ‘Star Tour’s’ written in huge letters.

“Grab the bus!”

They run at full speed to catch up. Wolfe grabs the handle bar to the double decker with Steele in pursuit. The bus begins to pick up speed.

“Come on, reach for my hand!” yells Wolfe.

Wolfe reaches with his arm extended out to Steele. Immediately in front of him, a taxi stops and opens his driver’s door.

“Oh shit!” yells Steele.

His momentum keeps him running forward. He avoids hitting the taxi's open door and jumps onto the trunk of the cab. He continues running over the roof onto the hood and back onto the street without losing too much distance from the bus.

"Hey," yells the taxi driver.

"Was that a movie star?" asks the female fare to her husband.

Steele is almost out of breath when Wolfe extends 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 grabs the rope and is dragged by the bus with Wolfe reeling him in.

A car swerves into the lane and Steele pushes off of the ground and jumps into the air. The momentum pulls Steele over the roof of the compact car by the bus's speed, but narrowly misses colliding with it. Wolfe pulls the rope closer and Steele grabs the handle reaching the outside lift of the bus.

"I hate taking the bus," yells 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, we made it. We're free and clear. Nobody can catch us now."

The bus slows down and stops. The tour guide in the bus speaks through a megaphone and addresses the bus occupants.

"On our right is the famous Shrine Auditorium, known for countless Oscar ceremonies and other star-studded occasions."

Steele pushes himself through the doorway much to the surprise of the driver and tour guide.

"Drive now!" he yells at the driver.

The crowd murmurs.

"Aren't they action stars Steele Taylor and Wolfe Neilson?"

"I heard they were on the last tour!"

"Where's my camera?"

"Can you get their autograph?"

The tour guide is overwhelmed by this unexpected interruption.

"Excuse me, we are on a strict schedule. This is a five-minute stop. No exceptions," responding to Steele's order.

Wolfe grabs the tour guide and points her at the window.

"See those three men?" Vansome is running through traffic with Crash and Burn trailing behind. "They're going to ruin your tour. Drive now and we will gladly sign autographs for your fares."

She looks outside and then back to the driver. She nods to him to continue driving.

“We will move on from the Shrine to downtown LA and the shopping district of the Alleys,” she uses the megaphone again to explain the change in venues. The bus pulls out with Vansome jumping onto the front landing. Crash and Burn grab onto the second entrance doors just as the bus starts to pick up speed.

Vansome pulls the bus doors open to kick Wolfe in the chest and knocking him into the driver. The chain reaction results in the bus veering into the wrong lane before the driver corrects himself. The two big wrestlers pry open their door and jump inside the second entrance. Steele and Wolfe climb the stairs to the second level of the double-decker bus.

“Is this a movie?” asks one of the tourists to the tour guide.

Cameras flash on Wolfe and Steele on the second level and they are momentary blinded.

“Our endearing public,” Wolfe says to Steele.

The top level of the double-decker has no roof, leaving both heroes vulnerable to attack. The two bodyguards climb the front stairs. Wolfe falls down on all fours.

“Hit them hard,” he yells at Steele.

Steele looks at Wolfe on the floor and shakes his head as he takes a running charge. He springboards off Wolfe’s back and uses the momentum to hit Burn squarely in the chest. Burn stumbles backward into Crash causing the two to tumble down the stairs back to the first level. Wolfe jumps up and slaps Steele’s hand.

“You got game, brother!” Wolfe yells as he heads to the back of the bus.

“Watch out!” yells Steele.

At that moment, Wolfe gets hit from behind and falls onto the corridor between the seats. All the tourists train their cameras to the back of the bus.

“Get up, old man, we have some unfinished business,” taunts Vansome. He climbed up the set of stairs in the back of the bus for the ambush.

“He’s talking to you,” Steele pokes Wolfe in the arm, “I’ll take care of the twins.” Steele leaps down the stairs. Wolfe turns to face Vansome.

“You’re girlfriend’s gone, Wolfe,” Vansome laughs.

“He’s not my type. And neither are you!” Wolfe punches Vansome back into an empty seat. “But let me introduce you to five of my friends.” The last thing Vansome sees is a fist coming towards his face.

Downstairs, Steele is boxed in. He is caught between Crash and Burn who use their size advantage and lack of space to corner him at the door entranceway. The driver gives a concerned look as Steele backs up.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you two on one isn’t fair?” Steele looks at the identical twins. “Course I’m assuming you both had a mother?” he adds wryly. Burn charges and Steele kicks him in the chest. Burn falls backward onto an old lady in a flowery dress.

“Sorry,” yells Steele.

The woman clubs Burn with her purse.

“You brute!”

Burn stands up and tries to be intimidating to the old woman. Instead he earns another shot in the head with her purse. He reaches to stop her and is slugged by a younger man with his knapsack.

“Leave her alone!”

Another tourist hits Burn until the group of angry tourists overwhelm him. Steele watches the fighting between the wrestler and the tourists.

“That evens up the odds,” he proclaims. Unfortunately as he turns his head, he takes a shot in the jaw from Crash and goes sprawling towards the street. Steele grabs the door hand bar at the last second before being thrown into traffic.

“Blaze says you got to go,” Crash lunges at Steele and uses the bus momentum to punch Steele in the stomach.

“You do everything that Vansome tells you?” Steele looks behind him towards an approaching alleyway. Steele grabs Crash and tries to push him off his feet. Crash holds his ground and turns his head to the side to push off Steele’s hand. Crash slowly uses his superior weight and pushes Steele down on the bus landing; Steele’s head is inches from the street. Crash pushes his face so close that Steele can smell the tar on the street. Crash smiles and raises his fist to deliver the final blow. Suddenly his fist freezes and his eyes open wide in pain. Behind him stands the tour guide, having delivered a kick to his groin. She looks at Steele.

“He was ruining the tour,” she says. Steele grabs the hunched over Crash.

“This is your stop,” says Steele and tosses him from the steps onto the rooftop of a convertible.

The canopy shreds open as Crash’s body falls though the roof. As he tumbles through, he twists and lands in the passenger seat. His head drops between the legs of a woman. The car comes to a screeching halt. A man with a long balding forehead jumps out of the driver seat of the car. He is 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 pay for this out of your pocket because I don’t plan on making a claim.” He gives Crash a push while he is still lying face down on the woman.

“Are you listening to me, do you know who I am?” the man brags. “You’ve ruined my... supper plans?” He faults on his last two words as Crash gets up and the man realizes how massive he is.

“Your dinner plans are the least of your problems.”

The man sees Crash’s fist and then is greeted by the warm asphalt.

Seconds later the convertible is spins on its rear tires as it rejoins traffic minus its original driver.

“Where are we going?” the woman asks with half fear and half excitement in her voice.

Crash looks at the street up ahead.

“We’re going to catch a bus!” as he watches the bus disappearing around a corner.

Vansome side steps out of the way of Wolfe’s fist.

“You telegraphed that punch. It was so slow I saw it coming yesterday.” He does a spinning back kick and hits Wolfe squarely in the chest knocking him into the lap of an attractive blond tourist.

“Sorry, miss,” says Wolfe as he looks her over.

“Honey, you can fall into my lap anytime,” she responds with a southern drawl. Wolfe steps back towards the front of the bus while Vansome comes running at him. A leg from the pretty blond inadvertently gets in the way and Vansome tumbles forward right into the fist of Wolfe. Vansome goes flying back to the end of the aisle.

“That’s two I owe you,” says Wolfe looking at the southern belle.

“Don’t worry, sugar, I’m sure you’ll think of a way to return the favor,” she sweetly answers.

Downstairs Steele grapples with Burn, trading punches back and forth. Several tourists continue to interfere, hitting Burn from a variety of angles. Steele yells to the driver

“Open the side doors!”

The door folds open and the driver takes a hard left giving Steele the opportunity to kick Burn out the door into a pile of garbage cans along an alleyway. Steele waves as Burn slams a garbage can to the ground in anger.

Everyone in the bus applauds and arms everywhere pat Steele on the back. The old lady approaches Steele. "What was that all about?" she asks. He looks her in the eyes. "Just taking out the trash!" She pats him sweetly on the head, "Boys will be boys."

Upstairs, Wolfe takes a smash to the gut that sends him tumbling into an empty seat. Vansome moves in for the kill.

"Old man, you're finished for good." He kicks Wolfe off the seat and sends him flying over the edge of the bus. The tourists gasp collectively as Wolfe goes falling to the street below. Vansome brags to the tourists.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that is how a real action star deals with his opponents."

He leans over the edge of the bus to look down on the street. He is slammed backwards by a punch in the nose. Wolfe is hanging on the rope of the banner hung from end to end of the bus. He looks up at Blaze.

"Rule number eight in action movies, Vansome. Never count your man out!"

Wolfe hits him with another punch while trying to hold on. Vansome spits out blood onto the seat.

"You're done, Wolfe. You just don't know it yet."

He reaches for Wolfe who swings away from the bus and almost hits the side of a passing light pole. Wolfe pulls his body close to the bus to avoid the next post. Vansome steps onto the seat and leans his body over the edge of the bus. He opens a switchblade and uses the blade to cut the banner rope.

"One less action star coming up!"

Wolfe falls further down the rope towards the street. The rope is about to snap and Wolfe hugs the side of the bus for survival. He sees another light pole and narrowly avoids it. Vansome isn't as lucky. The curved light assembly hits him while leaning over the edge, knocking him down to the street below.

Vansome falls, expecting the hard surface of the sidewalk and the pain that will overwhelm his body. He closes his eyes. Seconds later, he lands on a pile of boxes, cushioning his fall. He opens his eyes and sees the beautiful face of Pamela Anderson staring down on him. Vansome relaxes.

"Now things have taken a turn for the better," he says. He pushes himself up from the cardboard to talk to Pam and turns to stare into the face of Bill Clinton. He stands and backs away unsure of his surrounding. He turns and comes face to face with Wolfe.

“How did you get here?” Blaze yells and punches Wolfe in the stomach. Wolfe falls flat to the ground. Blaze walks over and steps on the cardboard cutout of Wolfe Neilson. Blaze notices all of the tourists looking at him with great curiosity. He looks around and sees a multitude of famous celebrity cardboard cutouts. He has fallen into a photo booth where tourists pose with faded stand-ups of their favourite movie star. The merchant runs up to Blaze.

“You’re going to have to pay for these,” the merchant whines to Blaze.

“Is he someone famous?” a young boy says to his mother not recognizing Blaze’s celebrity status. Blaze rips the head of the Wolfe’s cardboard stand up much to the chagrin of the merchant.

“I hate this town!” Blaze screams and throws the cardboard head of Wolfe onto the sidewalk.

Back on the bus, Steele has rejoined Wolfe on the upper deck. People are cheering and milling around the two of them.

“We did it! We got the papers!” Steele taps the duffle pack. “What do we do next?” he questions Wolfe.

“We should sign a few autographs,” Wolfe writes on a piece of paper as the tourists give them brochures to sign. “And I would like to thank a few people,” he looks over at the southern woman who blows him a kiss.

“You’d pick up in a funeral home,” Steele exclaims.

“That’s another story. For now, there is only one woman who I trust to solve our problems.”

The master bedroom is quiet except for the sound of breathing. The woman sleeps in a king-sized bed with purple silk sheets. The phone rings and she reaches over to pick up the receiver.

“Hello?” a half asleep voice answers.

“Toni, is that you? It’s Wolfe!”

Toni bolts straight up out of bed with a black visor over her eyes. She removes it and throws it to the floor.

“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. Is Steele okay? Where have you been?”

“Whoa, 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. He was being leaned on by the mafia and our old pal Blaze Vansome.”

“What? Mafia? Vansome? How did he shut down our movie?”

“Not him. Her! His silent partner wants to silence us...for good.”

“Stop talking like one of your action movies. Go see the cops. They’ll investigate and get you off the hook.”

“No way, Toni. We have proof that will put this mafia don away. This is LA and evidence can have a way of disappearing in this town.”

“Fair enough. But 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 blows her a kiss goodbye.

Steele hits 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.”

“Well, someone tipped off this crazy mafia woman and he was one of two people who knew where we went. Do us a favor 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?”

“Countless times. See you soon.” Steele puts the phone down. “We’ve got an hour to kill, what do you want to do?”

“After tonight, I need a drink.” Wolfe looks past the phone towards the bar.

“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,” Steele signifies with a finger.

Wolfe slaps him on the back “Watch it, Steele, I’d almost got the impression that you’re looking after me.”

They laugh and as they sit down at the outside bar.

Toni changes quickly into a pair of jeans and t-shirt. She runs down to her parking garage and jumps into her Lexus. The engine turns over on its first

try. She blows by the parking attendant.

Across the street, a black car turns its ignition over, its lights watching Toni drive down the street. The driver is backlit, his head in profile; a bald head. Pang dials a cell phone. "She's on the move, I'll let you know where to meet."

Meanwhile, driving in Hollywood, Crash steers the stolen convertible, with Burn in the back. They stop at the photo stand to pick up Vansome as a passenger. Blaze looks at the woman in the front seat.

"Why is she here?"

"She came with the car," explains Crash.

"Get rid of her!" he barks back. She looks at Crash and then gets out of the car in a huff.

"Will you call me?" she wails.

"You bet," Crash replies and starts to pull the car out into the street. She chases 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," snarls Blaze as they drive off.

In the backseat, Burn is preoccupied with wiping garbage from his clothes. Vansome looks at him. "You stink," Vansome sneers.

"Sorry. I got thrown into garbage cans. I'm still picking it out of my clothes."

"Let's get home and you can get cleaned up. I'll dump this car before it gets reported stolen," says Crash. Just then, Vansome's phone rings.

"What do you want?" Blaze pauses to hear the voice on the other line. "Oh sorry, it's you. They are? Where? No, we'll be there to help you finish it." He closes the phone.

"What did she say?" ask Crash.

Blaze looks him in the eyes. "Turn this car around now! We got one more chance to end this once and for all."

Chapter Thirteen

The Hunters and The Hunted

Men of Extreme Action Movie Set 2 a.m.

Wolfe and Steele enter into the lot as the security officer sleeps at his post. The movie set is deserted. They drive around the sound stage and park by the door on the west side.

“What you think, Wolfe? We’re having a midnight meeting with our producer to get rid of the bad guys. Reminds me of one of your movies.”

“Steele, trust me. No one could write something this convoluted.”

“Yea. Who’d believe this crazy plot?”

They enter the door into the staging area between the jungle exteriors and bunker sets.

“Yo, Toni, you here?”

Echoes bounce off the walls and then silence.

“She’s not here yet.” Wolfe points at the jungle set. “Everything is still set up from my jungle attack scene. They left out the machine gun for the big explosive finale.” He picks it up and rat-a-tats the gun until he is aiming at Steele.

“Money or your life, Steele?”

“Put it down before I shove it down your throat!” Steele and walks over to a switchboard with a detonator push down box. He motions that he’s going to push the lever.

“Threaten me again, Wolfe, and I’ll blow you to Kingdom Come!”

“Can’t you guys ever be serious?” yells Toni coming from the dressing room area.

“Finally, someone who is sane.” Steele is still looking at the pointed barrel of Wolfe’s gun.

“Stop aiming that at me, it could go off,” Steele pushes the barrel from his chest.

“Relax it’s just paintballs. It won’t sting you any more than last time.”

“Guys, you woke me up this morning so I could take this ‘proof ‘ to the cops. Where is it?” Toni holds out her hand. Wolfe gives her the documents and she leafs through the pages.

“In there,” Wolfe points to the sheets, “are the illegal tactics they used on Tassel. Toni, they were threatening his son!”

“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 interrupts.

“Has anyone else seen these yet?” Toni questions.

“No, you are the only one.”

Toni’s phone rings.

“We’re good.” She hangs up.

“Who was that?”

“Your support. Let’s take these documents back where they belong.”

The west door opens and a car’s headlights obscures the people entering. Toni backs away. Julia Sembrodi enters with Oz and three other suits. From the dressing room, Vansome enters with Crash and Burn.

“What the hell!” Wolfe and Steele back up. Steele steps sideways to the mafia group while Wolfe faces Vansomes’ crew.

“Toni, these guys have been after us. What are you doing?” Wolfe asks.

“Don’t be so thick, Wolfe, Toni sold us out! The only question is....why?” Steele spits. Toni steps forward and slaps Steele in the face.

“Enough of your drama, Steele!” she threatens. “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 looks at Julia and points back at Steele and Wolfe, “They’re unarmed.”

“You’ve been in partnership with Vansome since the beginning?” Wolfe realizes how obvious the question is.

Blaze steps forward. “What was your first clue? You guys are has-beens, you’re yesterday’s heroes. No one wants to watch 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 excited look on a kid’s face when he sees you? I’ve screwed up during my career but I sure as hell

didn't forget why I got into this business. You're pathetic, and so are you, Toni, for selling us out."

"I don't understand," Steele butts in. "We didn't tell you," he points at Toni, "about going to Sembrodi Enterprises. Is Pang involved with you?"

"Pang is a old fool. He promised to call me on your activities if you showed up to see him. He told me where you were going and I phoned Julia before you landed up at her office," Toni answers. Wolfe pounds his fist into a fake set wall.

"Damn it, and here we were blaming him for our set-up!"

"Gentlemen," Julia finally speaks, "This was strictly a business deal until you involved yourself. You assaulted my restaurant and my company. In business, you either buy out or remove competition." Oz pulls out a gas can from outside the doorway. "You're not worth my money."

"We didn't even get to negotiate?" plays Wolfe.

"You are about die on your own movie set in a tragic fire. You'll 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 looks to the right. "Oz!" Oz unholsters his weapon.

"Sorry, blokes, no happy ending today."

He points his gun at their heads as they raise their hands.

"Any ideas," Steele motions to Wolfe.

"Fresh out, been good working with you."

They shake hands. Vansome fakes some tears.

"How touching," he looks at Oz. "Can we get this over with, I have a brunch date later this morning." Out of nowhere, the main spotlight switches on from the control room overlooking the sound stage. Standing in front of the booth is Pang and Madison Jones.

"Is this a private party or can anyone join?" Madison cocks her head at Julia. Vansome panics.

"Who told those two about the meeting? Toni?"

Blaze grabs Toni by the back and pushes her towards Crash and Burn.

"Blaze, I thought you wanted insurance against your partner," Madison yells. Vansome stiffens and looks at Julia.

"I have no idea what that bimbo is talking about. She's trying to work us against each other."

"You had better be telling me the truth. Otherwise another body will be found in this fire." She runs her sharp nails up Vansome's chest and slaps him in the face.

“Take care of all four of them,” she motions to Oz and his thugs.

“We now join our feature presentation.” Pang clicks his fingers and all lights go out in the sound stage plunging the set into total darkness. Gunfire illuminates the darkness where Wolfe and Steele were standing.

“Enough. Stop before you shoot one of us,” Julia screams. Moments later the backup lights come on giving some red illumination to the set but it is still hard to see more than few feet. Julia barks out more orders.

“You,” she points 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 leaves with two of his men towards the sets.

“Don’t just stand there, Vansome,” Julia yells. “You’re either part of the solution or you’re dead. Find them!”

Blaze grimaces. “We’ll bring them back, but I better not get a bullet in my back!”

Julia looks at him with a menacing stare, “Have I ever broken one of our deals?”

Blaze and his two bodyguards begin searching around the sound stage.

The mafia thugs search the jungle set interior. The main control booth spews out the sounds of crickets and insects through the speakers. Water drips down the fake foliage; the heat in the building further reinforces the atmosphere of the jungle. Two of the thugs walk along the path with their guns drawn. One of them steps tentatively ahead while the other stops, hearing a sound.

A body stretches down from an above tree branch. The thug turns to face his attacker. Before he can even register alarm, he is disarmed and two fists come on either side of his head knocking him out cold. His body falls and is eaten up by the jungle moss disappearing into the dark. The whole attack occurs silently, taking only seconds.

The second thug turns around and notices the disappearance of his partner.

“Gino, where are you?” he whispers. He turns around and steps forward as a trap floor opens up. He teeters on the edge almost falling in. He regains his balance.

“I’m getting out of here!” he turns back into the incoming fist of Steele. The collision sends him falling into the darkness of the pit. The trapdoor covers itself as if nothing had occurred here. Steele disappears into the dry ice mist. Seconds later Crash and Burn enter onto the path.

“Why are we going here? Didn’t Sembrodi’s men already come this way?”

“I don’t know, Blaze said to look so that’s what I’m doing,” answers Burn.

“Less talking, before we give ourselves away. Only communicate with hand signals. Just like our wrestling matches.” Crash shows him a fist to mean keep quiet. Burn flips him the bird.

Through the set, an artificial river runs through the rock formation. Crash steps to his left to avoid the pyro techniques switchbox for setting the set’s special effects. Burn hears a splash coming from the river and investigates. He looks into the bubbling water; a goldfish swims by. Burn smiles.

Splooosh!!!! Wolfe comes out of the water and empties his machine gun into Burn’s chest. Red globs of blood come gushing down Burn’s body. Burn slumps to the ground and his eyes well up with tears. Wolfe disappears into the water as Crash empties his magazine unsuccessfully at the water’s surface.

“Speak to me! Are you okay?” He cradles Burn’s head in his chest. The red blood oozes and drips down from his mouth.

“Brother, this is it! Remember all the good we’ve had together. Tell Blaze I tried! Promise me you’ll make them pay!” cries Burn.

“They will pay in blood,” states Crash. “I’ll never forget you.”

Burn smells the blood on his hands from the wounds on his chest. Suddenly he makes a funny face.

“What’s wrong?” asks Crash.

“I never thought that my blood would smell like vegetable oil.”

Steele appears behind Burn.

“Maybe you weren’t shot? Yet!” He hits Crash with the butt end of the paintball gun, knocking him out. Steele pushes Crash’s unconscious body into a crevasse and the foliage immediately covers up his body. Steele follows Crash into the bushes to tie him up. Burn rises to attack but is dragged down from behind by Wolfe who pulls him into the murky water and they disappear into the current. Moments later Blaze comes running into the dark set.

“Crash, Burn are you here? I heard gunfire. Where are you? I demand to know!” He pulls out a nasty looking gun and is greeted by silence.

“Fine, if you want something done. You do it yourself.”

He steps towards the water but whirls around after hearing a sound behind him. A water-soaked Wolfe kicks the gun out of Blaze’s hand and it disappears into the bushes. Blaze takes off his jacket to reveal hard muscles under a white tank top. He steps over the special effects detonator.

“Time to finish you, old man, once and for all.”

Wolfe motions him with his hand to advance. "Don't sing it, just bring it!"

In the adjoining bunker set, Oz is approaching the first landing. He stops. He hears the sound of metal on metal but can't place the direction it's coming from. He looks down and a shadow grows from above. By the time Oz looks up, Steele comes flying down in his cable harness. His momentum smashes Oz into the wall. Oz punches back and knocks the air out of Steele's lungs. Steele chokes out a sentence.

"I thought Aussies were friendly guys who hunted crocodiles. What happened to you?" He grabs Oz's throat and clamps down to block his airway.

"I found something else to hunt, mate."

Oz head butts Steele knocking him backwards. Oz pulls out a boomerang.

"Not that thing again! Are you going to club another crow to death?" Steele jokes. Oz presses a button on the top of the boomerang and a serrated knife-edge comes out along the length of both sides.

"No, mate, this is a new feature. I like to make your death more creative than that!"

Wolfe lands on his butt in the jungle grass as Blaze advances.

"You don't get it, do you? Times passed you by. You can't beat me now." He smashes Wolfe again with a kick to the chest. "You couldn't beat me in your prime," another vicious chop to the Wolfe's head. "You can't beat me now," another kick to the stomach. "You will never beat me," Blaze stands triumphantly over Wolfe's fallen body. Wolfe moves slowly as if defeated. Vansome takes an extra second for his last blow and hits the ground instead. Wolfe moves with quicker than expected speed and hits Blaze with a well-placed kidney punch.

"I may not be in my prime, so instead of young and stupid, I'm old and treacherous," he kicks Blaze in the back and sends him sailing through the air. Wolfe runs over to Blaze.

"You may be faster but I've been in more movie situations than you could ever dream of." Wolfe's back leg pushes off a rock and does a front sidekick to the head that causes Blaze to fall down again. Wolfe stands over him and receives a kick to the groin that causes 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 cradles Wolfe's chin in his hand, "by lying, cheating and stealing," and he smashes Wolfe in the jaw.

Wolfe falls to the ground. Blaze picks up the gun that was knocked out of his hand earlier and points it directly at Wolfe. “This ends now!”

Wolfe kicks with his right foot, causing Blaze to misaim the gun and fire into the ground. Blaze stumbles back and lands on the detonator’s box. Wolfe jumps into the bushes.

“Oh shit!” yells Blaze. He attempts to stand as the explosive fireworks go off underneath igniting his hair. He tries to beat the flames out. He stumbles towards the water and jumps in headfirst. A moment later he comes splashing out of the water, screaming and turns his head into the fist of Wolfe. Blaze is knocked unconscious and floats on top of the water.

“What a hothead,” Wolfe smirks.

Oz swipes Steele with the blade of his boomerang. Steele is gouged on his chest.

“Ow, that hurts,” he yells.

“Only the beginning,” taunts Oz. He throws the boomerang and lunges at Steele.

“Must be tough to catch,” as the two edged weapon flies by. Steele catches Oz and twists his body to avoid the return of the boomerang which imbeddes itself into the nearby wall. Steele and Oz become intertwined in the cables connected to his suit. They struggle until they face each other; their arms are tangled in a mess of cables. Neither one can hit the other.

“Your boomerang is out of range now, mate,” Steele gives a bad Aussie accent.

“I don’t need a blade against a Hollywood lightweight!” Oz shows his teeth. “I’m going to bite your face off.” He moves in like a vampire.

“What are you, Hannibal Lector?” Steele tries to pull back away from Oz’s teeth and causes the cable to recoil back slamming them both into the opposite wall. Both men are momentarily winded from the impact. Oz recovers first, he works one of his hands free and grabs the boomerang from the wall. Steele looks up to see a metal platform above them. He pulls his weight down on the cable and jumps into a pit on the set. Oz is dragged along but cuts one of the cables like butter with the blade of the boomerang. Steele stretches the remaining cables to its maximum point and the recoil pulls both of them upwards. Both bodies crash into the above steel platform. There is a soft puncture sound and red droplets of blood drip down the cable to the floor. Their bodies are intertwined and as they spin right, Oz has a fierce grin on his face. Wolfe looks down at his chest and sees Oz’s hand holding the

boomerang plunged into his own chest. Oz starts to convulse and become unconsciousness. Steele hangs in the air strapped to his badly bleeding opponent.

“Mate, you should have stuck with crocodiles.”

Meanwhile at the main doorway, one Mafioso remains. As he guards the entrance, Sembrodi taps her foot slowly on the concrete floor anticipating Oz’s return.

“I don’t like the quiet,” she says. Suddenly a tapping sound of wood on concrete comes from the shadows and Pang limps in slowly hunched over with a cane. The goon draws his gun.

“Where do you think you’re going, old man?” Pang lifts his head slowly and smiles; in a whirlwind of motion he spins his body around and smashes the fingers of the man’s hand with his cane. The gun goes flying into the darkness. The man in the suit screams and runs at the small Asian man. Pang stands perfectly still and moves his body slightly at the last moment as the thug misses him and slams into the wall. He shakes his head and tries to get up only to receives four quick blows with the cane to the stomach, back, arm, and behind the knees. Finally, Pang issues a blooding curdling scream as he delivers a final blow to the head. The thug crumples to the floor. Pang composes himself and lightly bows to Julia.

“I won’t make the same mistake as he did,” she says.

She pulls out a gun, “Good bye, Grandpa.” The gun fires but the bullet flies into the ceiling as Madison Jones kicks the gun from Sembrodi’s hand.

“Come on, fight a real bitch!” Madison challenges.

Julia strikes and grabs Madison’s hair and slams her down to the concrete floor.

Pang steps forward but Madison stretches her arm out to stop him. She holds up a long strand of hair that Julia has pulled out.

“This bitch is mine!” She sends a vicious kick to Julia’s midsection that knocks her into the set display behind her. Julia jumps up and punches Madison to the chin. Madison returns the favour with a back slap to Julia’s face.

“You little Hollywood harlot. I’ve squashed bugs bigger that you.” Julia moves her jaw back and forth from the impact

“You don’t scare me,” Madison pulls Julia closer to face her. “Behind your goons and lawyers, you’re just another twisted little crook.”

Julia smashes Madison in the stomach causing her to fall to the floor.

“I’m worth more than you could imagine. All earned in a man’s world,” Julia glares at Madison’s fallen form. Madison stands up and does a forward flip into Julia knocking her to the floor.

“You make the same mistakes as men. You think success comes from stepping on people to reach the top.” Madison advances as Julia grabs the gun knocked out the goon’s hand on the floor.

“Men, women, they all go down before me. Nothing personal,” she cocks the gun and points at Madison, “it’s only business.”

Smash! Steele’s fist comes up from behind decking Julia. Her body falls to the floor. Steele shakes his fist in discomfort as Wolfe walks up beside him.

“Damn it! I hate hitting women!”

Madison advances towards Steele and traces her hand down his arm.

“Thanks for saving my hide, hero,” she kisses him fully on the lips.

“Whoa,” Steele backs away, “are lesbians allowed to kiss a guy?”

“Lesbian? Steele, you should know not to believe everything you read in the tabloids. Mind you, I use it to my advantage. When it suits me.”

Steele looks back at Wolfe who shrugs.

“One loose end to tie up,” Steele says as he watches Pang bring Toni towards them.

“I do not appreciate people who lie to me,” Pang looks at Toni. Steele looks 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 points at Wolfe, “into a team?”

Toni raise her dejected head and spits into Steele’s face.

“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 you everything. And you never appreciated it. Ever. Finally I decided that I wanted to do the taking. I figured the two of you couldn’t make it together. Do oil and water would mix? I wanted to bankrupt the two biggest egos in the action film business.”

“That was your fatal mistake,” states Pang.

“What?” replies Toni.

“Your downfall was partnering with even worse egos. When you deal with the devil, you’re bound to get burned.”

“Let’s take her to security and get the cops,” Madison pulls Toni with her towards the door.

“I’m sorry, Toni.” Steele realizes that he is partly responsible for Toni’s betrayal. Pang reaches 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 steps backwards to stand in front of Wolfe and Steele. He bows before them.

“The two of you work well together,” he turns and follows Madison as she drags Toni to the door.

“Hard to believe we didn’t trust him,” says Steele as they watch him go. Steele’s face looks sad. Wolfe slaps 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 guard from the door springs from the shadows. Both Wolfe and Steele turn around, Steele punches to the head. Wolfe to the chest. The guard crumbles like a house of cards back to the floor. They both turn to each other.

“You’re right. But with Toni turning on us, it doesn’t feel like much of a victory.”

“Why didn’t you say so,” Wolfe raise his arm and snaps his fingers. “One happy ending coming up!”

Malibu Beach *A Sunny Afternoon*

Wolfe and Steele are lying on beach chairs relaxing in the afternoon sun. The hot rays beat down on them with hardly a tourist in sight. They tap drink glasses in celebration.

“Didn’t I tell you we’d get a happy ending?” says Wolfe as he downs his drink.

“You were right,” Steele looks over his sunglasses to see a beautiful female surfer come out of the water. Her wet suit is halfway zippered to reveal a shapely sculptured body.

Wolfe follows Steele’s eyes and raises his sunglasses to watch her arrival from the water. “Life is good, my friend, nothing’s going to ruin this day.” Wolfe leans up to get a better look at the beautiful surfer. She smiles. Wolfe smiles back. She pulls an Uzi from behind her back.

“Duck!” Steele yells and jumps on Wolfe, knocking him into the sand. Bullets spray up and demolish the deck chairs.

“Why are gorgeous women always so deadly?” Steele comments as he raises his head up from the sand. The surfer approaches, gun ready to deal death to both of them.

Suddenly her mouth opens and she stops. She falls to the beach face first with a knife sticking out of her back. Behind her the equally beautiful Madison stands with her arm extended from throwing the knife. She smiles at Steele and Wolfe. She turns, interrupted by gunfire as four advancing jet skis come in with machine gun fire raining down on the beach. She runs 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 points at his bathing suit while Steele shakes his head.

“Maybe this is a moment you can use my assistance?”

They both turn to see Hamesh come out of hole in the sand. He pulls out 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 makes an explosive gesture with his hands and mouths the word ‘boom’.

“Your timing is fantastic, Hamesh,” as Steele grabs his gun.

“Good luck, I’ll be around,” and he disappears back into the sand.

Steele and Wolfe take aim at their adversaries as they land on the beach. Wolfe takes out one by igniting the jet ski. The next jet ski rider stops on the beach and throws a grenade that lands near them. They run for higher ground. Steele takes a leaping jump into the sand and fires three rounds into the grenade-throwing gunman, his body collapses into the water creating fresh shark bait. The other two gunmen cautiously advance. Steele takes a bullet in the arm and loses his gun. They continue running, charging towards an old surfer shed. One of the gunmen picks up Steele’s gun during the chase and admires its handcraft. He aims the gun at Steele who is running with his back turned. The sight has Steele dead to rights and the gunman finger is on the trigger. A shrill sound ignites from the weapon. The gun, not recognizing the hand holding it, explodes. The gunman is blown apart. Steele and Wolfe dash behind the shed.

“I think that last explosion took out the last of them,” Steele gasps out of breath.

“Why don’t you look around the corner and see,” offers Wolfe.

“Me? You’re the one with the gun, why don’t you check?”

“Your constant bickering is the end of both of you.” A man who looks remarkably similar to Oz appears at the other end of the shed. His gun is pointed directly at their backs.

“Lose the gun, Wolfe,” he commands.

Wolfe tosses 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 says to his attacker.

The gunman laughs, “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. Good bye, Men of Extreme Action.”

Blam! The door of the shed opens and smashes the attacker in the face. Pang steps out into the beach dune in a calm, tranquil state and closes the door behind him. The attacker falls 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 stands up from his director’s chair and motions 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 lifts up the Oz actor and shakes his hand. The film crew disperses and leave the beach shoot. Wolfe and Steele approach Pang.

“You were pretty good, Pang. What made you decide to finally appear in our movie?”

Pang looks very thoughtful to the sky. He motions to them to come closer as if to tell a great secret. Steele and Wolfe bow their heads to listen to his words.

“The money.” He turns and walks off while Wolfe and Steele laugh. The two of them head to the beach.

“It’s a perfect day, my friend, with all the press fanfare about the our real life exploits, the movie is a sure fire box-office hit. This is a perfect ending for us,” Wolfe says to Steele.

Steele watches the ocean tide come in.

“What’s wrong, buddy, we’re back on top,” asks Wolfe.

“This is a perfect ending but...”

“But what?”

“What are we going to do for a sequel?”

JIM KOCHANOFF