

Chapter 8

Tom's mouth felt dry and his eyes crusty. He tried to move, but his limbs were heavy.

"Sarah?" he called out in a croaky and almost inaudible voice.

There was no answer. He opened his mouth to call again, but had barely unstuck his tongue from his upper palette when he was shaken violently by the ankles. He cracked his gritty eyes open, but could see very little. All was dark and deathly quiet. No thumping machine, no alarming clicks. A strong light suddenly shone into his sore eyes.

"Wake up, Joseph," said an unfamiliar woman's voice.

Tom's breathing became laboured. He could hear shoes shuffling and sporadic whispering. He struggled to look past the bright light that was so close he could feel its heat on his skin. Slowly a face took shape, emerging out of the dark corona around the intense glow.

"Is he awake?" another voice asked. This time a man; in deep, southern American drawl.

"I think so," answered the original female voice.

A hand slapped Tom hard across his right cheek. He jerked, startled, and felt a dribble of snot fire from his nose onto his upper lip. The liquid tracked into his open mouth. It tasted metallic. The light moved to one side and a face, a woman's face, coalesced in front of him. Tom stared, first feeling shock then anger, then a sickness that erupted from his stomach and burnt the back of his throat.

"Mona?" he said.

The woman with coffee coloured skin and tightly curled black hair, looked first to her left then her right at wispy phantoms that flickered in the half light.

"What?" said the woman, tightly, turning her stare back to Tom.

"What's going on, Mona?" Tom looked around, feeling pain in his neck and chest as he moved.

"Where's Sarah?"

"Who's Sarah?" the woman asked, bemused. She looked at Tom, expectantly, "Who's Sarah, and why the fuck do you keep calling me Mona?"

The woman's voice lacked Mona's sycophantic whine, but more shockingly was unmistakably American. Tom squinted his eyes and bit a painful lip. A large man's hand suddenly appeared to one side of his face.

"No," shouted the woman, "That's enough. Sit him up. And for fuck sake, get him a drink of water or something. We're not fucking animals!"

Two men emerged out of the shadows and swung Tom around into a sitting position. A plastic cup of water was thrust into his hand.

"And can we have a little light on the matter?" called the woman. There was no movement in the room. "Hello, is anyone listening to me? Turn the god-damn lights on!"

Lights flickered on, and Tom looked around the room. It was a large, empty warehouse punctuated by random islands of industrial debris.

"Why do you keep calling me Mona?" the woman asked again, "You know who I am. Or did Boris punch you in the head once too much?"

“But you are Mona...married to Taylor...tale-telling friend of Sarah’s,” the words dribbled out of Tom’s mouth, making sense to him, but seeming a foreign currency among this American assembly.

“No, Joseph, I’m Sherry Goodman. And you’re yanking my chain.”

“No,” stammered Tom, “I’m not yanking your... You called me Joseph?”

“You prefer Joe?” Mona offered, “You always insisted on Joseph, before.”

“No, there seems to be some confusion. My name’s Tom Friday. I’m a photographer. I’m having an MRI scan...and...and...you don’t exist.”

“Joe, Joe, Joe, you can do better than that.”

“Better than what? You are a...what did Sarah call it?...A cocaine hangover,” Tom continued, stoically.

“So, you look like Joseph, sound like Joseph, and...” she wiped a finger across Tom’s top lip, “...bleed like Joseph. But you still claim you’re not Joseph?” Mona suggested ironically.

“You can say what you like. You’re not real.”

Tom pouted and attempted to hold down the continuing acid reflux from his churning stomach.

“Ok,” reasoned Mona, “pray explain how we picked you up yesterday, outside your house?”

Tom turned his head away, and stared into the distance.

“Look at your shoes, Joseph. Go on, just take a quick look. Humour me.”

Tom nonchalantly look down. The brown, suede trainers, that he did not recognise, were spattered with something red.

“Yeah, Joseph...Oh, yeah!...” Mona said triumphantly.

“These aren’t my shoes,” pleaded Tom.

“And I guess that’s not Preston’s blood either?” Mona concluded.

He stared at the woman, dumbfounded; feeling his eyes moistening.

“Now, before you so rudely curtailed Preston’s promising career, he asked you something important,” the woman said. “Now, whether you gave him the answer or not is sadly interred with his bones, due to the small fact that you all but removed his head from his body. However, good ol’ life is givin’ you a second chance.”

Tom believed he knew what was coming next, and he feared it greatly. He closed his eyes tightly, but the woman’s voice continued, supplying indisputable proof that this time, tight eye closing was not transporting him anywhere.

“Look at me, Joseph. Just tell me, who is the Spring?”

Tom lifted his head and opened his eyes. He noticed a sudden intensity both in his body and his stare.

“Listen, you pathetic twat,” he said, “As you are well aware, the last person that insisted on asking me that question ended up as road kill on my trainers. So before you open that tight, little mouth of yours, again - Sherry - you might like to ask yourself if you are feeling extraordinarily lucky.”

Sherry moved back half a pace, as if the power that Tom had felt flow into him was patently visible to others.

“...And we’re back in the room,” sneered Sherry, “For a moment I thought Joseph had become a simpering, Limey limp dick.”

Tom jerked his head up, bringing his eyes into direct contact with hers. A laugh snorted from his bloody nose.

“‘Limey limp dick’, that’s the best you wankers can do, is it?”

“Look, Joseph, we are all professionals here. Why do we have to behave like rookie no-nuts, huh?” She gestured to one of the four spooks that stood around her, “Looks like we have no choice, Boris,” she said to the thick-set man standing next to her.

Two of the others grabbed each of Tom’s legs, and a fourth, his arms. He was held down tightly onto the bed.

“Get his pants off,” ordered Sherry.

Boris started to remove Tom’s trousers. Tom struggled violently, but the other three were too strong.

“Come on, Boris. And his underpants!”

Boris obeyed, and pulled Tom’s underpants down, with a look of dutiful disgust on his face that one might see when a dog owner wipes up his new puppy’s vomit. Tom’s penis and testicles stood proud, but showed signs of stress. Boris reached down to the floor, and returned to Tom’s view holding a pair of bolt cutters.

“Now,” Sherry said with a wry smile, “talking of no-nuts...”

Boris slipped the open blades of the bolt cutter around Tom’s exposed scrotum.

“Do I have your attention, now?” Sherry asked.

Tom nodded, staring down at the potentially grizzly scene.

“Ok, Joseph,” Sherry walked over to Tom, and held her face inches from his, “Do you want to try that ‘pathetic twat’ crack again...No?...I thought not.” She straightened up and glanced down at Tom’s exposed privates, “Not a bad package. Real shame...” she stepped two paces away from the bed, “...real shame. So, I’m gonna ask just one more time. Who, Joseph, is the Spring?”

Tom brought his gaze up to meet Sherry’s.

“Sherry...” he said.

“Why yes, Mr Miller?” she teased.

“...Go fuck yourself!” Tom said.

Sherry nodded to Boris.

“Boris, cut the fuckers off!”

Boris turned his head to her.

“Really?” he asked in undiluted anguish.

“Just snap those two *liddle* ol’ handles together,” she said.

“Yeah,” said Boris, “but really?”

“Are you going to disobey a direct order, soldier?”

“No, Ma’am, but...really?”

Sherry reached to her waist and pulled a gun from its holster. She pointed it at Boris.

“But Sherry, he hasn’t told us anything.”

“Well, he can still talk without his balls. He’ll...just have to move sections in the choir,” Sherry said, bereft of emotion, and cocking her revolver.

Boris pushed his elbows outwards in preparation to exert the force necessary to separate Tom from his testicles. He stopped again, and looked beseechingly at Sherry. She simply waved her hand like a Caesar proclaiming at the arena. Boris threw his elbows out again. In spite of all his protestations, the look on his face left no doubt in Tom’s mind that the blades were coming together this time.

“Wait!” Tom shouted.

Boris just managed the arrest the powerful movement he had almost started. He looked at Sherry. She waved him away.

“So,” she asked Tom, “are we ready to talk now?”