

July 2013

Prologue

The car park is deserted, so too the beach below it. Not even the most fanatical surfer would be in the water on a day like this: mid-winter, the wind howling in from the Antarctic, whipping the waves, chop on top of the swell, foam on top of the chop, the whitecaps taking flight into a pall of sea mist. The breakers are thundering in, washing across the rocks, even at low tide.

The detective cruises the empty lot, sees only one out-of-season campervan, battened down against the blustering wind. There's no sign of the old Jaguar—good. They've agreed to leave their cars at different locations, nothing left to chance.

He parks and draws a deep breath, peering out across the ocean into the greyness. There is no horizon, just a constant monochrome, the sky melded with the sea, the whitecaps only becoming visible closer to the shore. He feels his heart racing, takes another breath, tries to settle his anticipation, but the

thundering surf sounds a lot like destiny. Everything he's ever worked towards, the hours of drudgery, the unpaid overtime, ignoring the jibes, getting down into the gutter with the low-life, probing and prodding, doing what needed to be done. And now the pay-off, his commitment validated, his dedication vindicated. It's down there, on the beach somewhere, waiting for him.

He eases the car door open, feels the wind grab at it, attempting to wrench it from his grip. The air is bitter, freezing and salt-laden, cutting through his clothes. He wraps his coat around him, lifts the collar, makes his way down the road, then descends the wooden stairs towards the beach. And still he can see no one, no sign of his source. No sign of life, except a sole gull, fighting to hold its own against the tempest.

This wasn't his idea. The whistleblower suggested the location, proposing they should meet on the beach, an apparently chance encounter: two strangers walking in opposite directions. A few short words exchanged, the documents delivered. The detective agreed readily enough. He didn't really care where they met; he just wanted the information, the mother lode, the dossier detailing all the corruption, all the rot, all the impunity and contempt. It will be career-defining, he has little doubt of that, even if the files contain only half of what has been promised. Even a third would be enough. It's every detective's dream: the big case that launches his career into the stratosphere, the one that leaves his rivals behind, wallowing in their envy. He cherishes the thought, then sets it aside. It's not a done deal, not yet.

He reaches the sand. The air is full of moisture—not rain, just mist lifted from the waves. He squints into it, and still he

sees no one. Down here the sound is deafening, the breakers smashing against the rocks generating a continuous roar. The details were clear, the time and the place: near Sphinx Rock. Not far. He can already see the formation emerging from the mist, just a few hundred metres along. A pleasant stroll in summer, a chilly slog today.

He reaches the rock, a couple of storeys high, and still there is no sign. But his man must be here, has to be here. And suddenly he is, stepping out from the shelter of the sandstone, beckoning the policeman to join him. They retreat behind the rock, where they are sheltered from the worst of the wind.

‘You came,’ the informant says.

‘Of course.’

‘Thank you,’ says the whistleblower. ‘Means a lot. Someone believing me.’

‘Don’t thank me. You’re the one who deserves all the credit.’

‘Where’s your partner?’

‘Keeping watch. Up by the car park.’

The man is clutching a plastic shopping bag, holding it tight.

‘That it, then?’ asks the policeman.

The man nods. He’s smaller than the detective had imagined, a shrunken, greyer, older version of the man beaming out of the corporate photographs, suit replaced by an oilskin jacket, a beanie, his work boots bearing the mud and scars of a dozen construction sites.

The detective flicks his head up the dunes towards the ridge above the beach. ‘Let’s get round the ocean side. Out of sight.’

The informant looks up, expression anxious. ‘You see someone?’

‘Nah. Just playing safe.’

The man agrees, and the pair walk around Sphinx Rock, out of sight, into the teeth of the gale. Towards the edge of the sandstone shelf, elevated here above the tumultuous seas, the air thick with spray.

The informant hands over the shopping bag and the detective opens it, steals a glance. A thick document, A4 pages, bound together in a ring binder with a clear plastic cover.

‘Amazing,’ he shouts, raising his voice to be heard. He has it now, in his hands, his future assured, his destiny guaranteed. All thanks to this man beside him, this brave and courageous man.

The detective steps towards the edge of the rocks, the low cliff pounded by the waves. The sky hangs low and ominous above the churning sea.

The man moves to stand beside him. ‘You’ll see it through?’ he yells.

‘Of course. We’ve both invested too much to see it go to waste.’

And now, unexpectedly, the informant is weeping, tears melded with the mist, shoulders shuddering. ‘You don’t know how much this means,’ he yells. ‘Redemption.’

The detective places his hand on the man’s shoulder, leans close to be heard. ‘You deserve it. Your wife and daughter will be proud.’

The man, seeming too overcome with emotion to speak, lowers his head.

The detective gestures to the document, still protected by the shopping bag. ‘Hope you have a backup. In case something happens to me.’

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‘Yes. On my laptop.’

‘Very wise,’ says the detective. He takes a deep breath. The moment is here, the pivotal moment, as if the world has conspired to bring him to this place, gifted him this opportunity. He steps quickly behind the informant and, with a mighty heave, sends him sprawling into the foaming cauldron.

The man fights for a time, first horror and then comprehension and finally resignation passing across his face. It doesn’t take long, less than a minute, and then he has vanished beneath the waves.

The detective stands, hand on his gun, grateful he hasn’t needed to use it. He looks around. No one in sight, the view from the ridge blocked by the Sphinx. Another minute and he begins to relax. It is done. There is no coming back from this. Who would want to? He smiles and grips the dossier.

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