

Chapter One - Sledgehammer.

Davin Grey picked his way along a crowded footpath into a mild autumn breeze that ruffled the hair of morning commuters.

The thump of a tram crunching along the tracks down Collins Street was one of those deliciously iconic sounds that reminded Davin why he had moved to Melbourne. It spoke of industry and commerce, movement and energy, urgency and connection. Here, people had purpose and direction. Here, you weren't judged. You could blend in and get on with your life. Make your own future. A far cry, Davin thought, from the malaise of the country town he grew up in. It was a relief to escape that myopic environment and the small mindedness of the people he'd grown up with.

That seemed a lifetime ago. Back then, he wasn't Grey, he was Gaye - a family name of which his father was fiercely proud. It was, as he would remind Davin often in his formative years, of ancient Gallic lineage stretching back to the Norman Conquests in 1066.

'It's from an Old French word: *gai*', his dad would say. 'Means full of joy.' And so would begin a recurrent sermon Davin would endure many times over the years.

'There are Gayes in our family who we should never forget, Davin, Gayes who have made the ultimate sacrifice,' he would add, nodding to a hallway lined with sepia photographs of men in uniform. 'Your name - *our* name - is etched in headstones at Flanders Fields and Vietnam.'

On occasion, Mr Gaye would bring out his musty collection of Motown records. 'Have a listen to this, my boy,' he'd say, ushering Davin into the lounge room. 'One of the world's greatest artists.' He would carefully slip a shimmering vinyl disc from its plastic sleeve, place it onto the turntable and drop the needle onto the edge with surgical precision.

As the light crackle gave way to the rich velvet gospel tones of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, his father would nod knowingly. 'Huh? *Huh?*' He would hand Davin the faded album cover and point to the timeless image of the powerful African American man staring defiantly into the distance. 'Do you think he's ashamed of *his* name?'

Davin would ruminate on that image many times over the years. He would study the singer's noble expression. The meticulous cut of his beard. The way the upturned collar of his black leather jacket oozed strength and attitude – virtues Davin felt he could never possess in the face of relentless bullying at school.

He was counselled to ignore the schoolyard taunts. 'Juvenile idiots,' his father would say, with a dismissive gesture. 'It's up to us to resist the modern interpretation of the word *gay*.' He would occasionally rant at the television or cast the paper aside when he encountered what he saw as the outrageous annexation of the word by today's society. 'It is still a word, you realise,' he would argue, 'that means *light-hearted* and *carefree*. And anyway boy, it's not *our* name. *Ours* is spelt G-A-Y-E.'

But tradition, definitions, Motown legends and spelling didn't count for much in the high school of a small country town. Cries of 'Aw, Davin – hey Da-vin – come and give us a kiss ya *gay* homo' usually preceded a belting at the hands of Rod Spode – a psychopathic lad with the intellect of a child and the physique of a nightclub bouncer. Spode had what amounted to severely heightened homophobia and decided from the moment he met Davin that he must be homosexual with a name like *Davin*. When Spode discovered that Davin's surname was *Gaye* it confirmed his position on this subject and he set off on a spectacular course of persecuting Davin, until leaving school early to pursue a poorly paid apprenticeship as a motorcycle mechanic, followed by a lucrative apprenticeship with a shady motorcycle organisation that appreciated his talent for violence.

By the time Davin could relax into the final years of school, his reputation as a raving homosexual was irreversibly entrenched and his romantic encounters with the opposite sex were zero. You could hardly blame the girls – Spode had skilfully executed a campaign that even had Davin questioning his own sexuality.

So at age 18, Davin packed his bags, hugged his mum, shook his father's hand, jumped on a train and moved to a new life in Melbourne. With the help of Deed Poll, *Gaye* became *Grey* and Davin closed a chapter in his life he hoped to forget.

Now, a few years out of university and into the world of advertising, Davin's name resonated on a new level. 'Davin' was different. 'Grey' was classy. Together, it was interesting – *memorable*. And Davin had grabbed his chance at this new beginning with both hands. Clients asked for Davin. Rarely did they bother with Ian, Jeff, Alan or Alexandra. Davin was always first to spring to mind – at first because

people remembered how unusual the name Davin was. Davin stuck. It was so much more than David or Daniel. It had a quality about it that looked good on a business card, particularly when it sat alongside his understated, but very cool as a cucumber new surname.

Davin had risen quickly in the client service ranks and his happy knack of getting on with people earned him new challenges and new accounts. After the departure of some senior staff, he found himself assuming the lead client service role on the agency's biggest account. He had certainly found his feet in a very short period of time.

As a consequence, his confidence was up and he was a very different person to the Davin you might have found in the schoolyard just a few years ago. He now nodded good morning to colleagues and had cheeky in-jokes with PAs and Receptionists who smiled with intent. And it wasn't difficult to see why. At 6'1", with broad shoulders, a firm jawline, fine blonde locks and a lean, athletic physique, Davin stood out. Now that he had the X factor of confidence, women were looking at him in a way they never had before. The dusty blonde in the media department. The sultry Art Director with the pierced nose. Even Kate, the pretty, petite barista at Dom's café was now smiling openly at him every morning.

Apart from feeling a tad underprepared for an important presentation to his agency's major client later in the week, Davin was feeling good about life. And there's still time, he reasoned, to get the presentation into shape.

He drew a long breath of fresh autumn air. Such a perfect season to be in this city, he thought. The clouds parted and the sun shone, there were pigeons fluttering above the overhead tram wires, and as he made his way along the street enjoying the morning sun on his shoulders, he was smacked right between the eyes by a sledgehammer.

Actually, more like a flash of exquisite auburn eyes.

Same effect as a sledgehammer though. She only glanced at him for a second. Maybe half a second. Was that a smile? A grimace perhaps – she seemed to be looking for something in her handbag.

'Come on. It's only just expired – and I'm about to go now,' she said, leveling a sinister stare at a podgy parking officer standing in front of her car.

Davin's eyes followed the drift of the floral skirt across her taut belly. She drew the handbag up and balanced it on her thigh, lifting her ankle off the ground and tilting her foot forward. The slender, tanned calf muscle contracted gracefully and Davin was transfixed, watching the tendons beneath her smooth skin tense and release as she shuffled feverishly through her handbag, finally locating a set of keys.

'Sorry love, too late. I've already entered the ticket,' the parking officer said, leaning in and slipping the fine beneath her car's tiny windscreen wiper. 'Good news though,' he said, with a toothy grin. 'You can park here all day now.'

'*Arsehole,*' she spat, opening the driver's door and hurling her handbag onto the passenger seat.

Davin edged further along the footpath to watch her through the window. The skirt rode halfway up her thigh and riveted him to the spot. With a splutter and a cough, her little white car chugged to life like an old lawn mower and jerked away from the kerb into flowing traffic.

The realisation that this girl was about to exit this scene, and quite probably his life, jolted Davin into action. Suddenly, he found himself loping along the pavement. There was no logic to what he was doing. But he continued to run.

The little car was heading up to a set of lights. He willed them to turn red and somehow they did. He darted in and out of the crowd, but the pavement was heavily congested with people trying to get to work. With an impressive leap, Davin traversed the kerb, landed on the street and began weaving through the traffic.

As he bounded along, he caught glimpses of the little white car, and when it came fully into view, it occurred to him that he had nothing to say. Even if he did, he reasoned, she didn't appear to be in the best of moods and may not be receptive to an out-of-breath stranger knocking on her window to tell her nothing in particular except that she was gorgeous and would she consider – well, would she like to – that is to say, could he – mmm. Yes, precisely. Nothing to say.

So he stood in the middle of the city traffic, looking at the little car containing a girl who was everything right now, but was about to become nothing when those lights up ahead turned green.

It was then that he became aware of the car itself. Such a strange shape. Boxy, but sort of curvy too. Snail-like, in fact, with flared guards at front and back, little bug-eye headlights poking out the front on sticks, comically skinny wheels and an

odd canvas roof stretched tight across the top like a piece of cling wrap over a bowl of leftovers.

A Volkswagen Beetle? he thought. No. More refined. Sleeker, and somehow much more European than a Volkswagen - if that was at all possible. Then his eyes settled on the back window and he saw a faded sticker. He moved forward a few steps and squinted. *Paris Motors*.

So maybe this car is French, Davin thought, which was of little assistance since he knew nothing of French cars and certainly had never seen anything like it.

The lights turned green and the traffic moved on. Davin watched that curious little white French car all the way up the road until it was a curious little white French dot in the distance.

Chapter Two – Potter.

‘Good Morning, Severson and Roberts, Sandy speaking.’

‘Davin Grey please’.

‘Shall I say who’s calling?’

‘John Alastase. Prince Tobacco.’

‘Sorry Mr Alastase, it appears that Davin’s not at his desk. Can I put you through to Tom Curtis or Alexandra Cav –’

‘Get Davin to call me back.’

‘And shall I –’

‘He knows the number.’

He may have been the minor shareholder and junior partner at Severson and Roberts, but Lance Roberts made sure that all who worked for the agency lived in fear of his wrath and were rarely late for work. It had not escaped his attention that this was the third day in succession that Davin was not at his desk by 9am.

Roberts had reluctantly granted some latitude because it was apparent, much to his irritation, that the agency’s most important clients liked Davin. He resented the

obligation to pander to young talent and particularly despised anyone who had the temerity to rise rapidly to the top. And as much as he made out that it was inconvenient to have to drag someone into line, he was looking forward to making a scene in the office. He had a particular gift for belittling people in front of their colleagues – a skill that benefited from sharp timing, ruthless sarcasm and the weight of unspoken threat. It had been a couple of weeks since Roberts had put the fear of god into the team and it was, in his mind at least, long overdue.

‘Tell me when Grey gets in,’ he barked at Sandy, adjusting his trousers above his sloppy girth.

‘Latté please, no sugar,’ Davin said absently across the brass Gaggia machine in Dom’s Café. Kate snuck a peek at him as she unlocked the portafilter and knocked steaming coffee grains into the bin.

‘Would you like,’ she said, deliberately, ‘anything else?’ She bent forward to reach for the milk, allowing her top to open and afford Davin a grand view of her cleavage. She held this position and fluttered her eyes up at him, but to her dismay, found that he was staring through the front window into the distance. She frowned, and cleared her throat.

‘Sorry?’

‘Can I get anything else for you?’ She inclined her head to allow her long, ebony hair to drift across her shoulder, then whipped it back with practiced ease, all the while maintaining eye contact.

‘Er, no. No thanks.’ Davin’s eyes resumed their far off stare beyond the café window.

For days now, his head had been in a fog created by the vision of that girl. His mind kept replaying slow motion vignettes of her. Those piercing eyes. The way the material of her dress slipped across her firm stomach. How she slid her tiny bottom into the driver’s seat. That funny little driver’s seat of that funny little car.

Suddenly he remembered the car. Somehow, it held a clue about this girl. There was *something*, Davin thought. In his mind’s eye, he saw the sticker again.

Paris Motors.

‘Of course!’ he spouted.

‘Sorry?’ Kate said.

‘Huh?’ Davin’s mind was finally kicking into gear. The fog was clearing. For the first time in several days, he was beginning to stitch together constructive thoughts. Was this Paris Motors a Melbourne based business? Or was it, he thought, a keepsake sticker from a trip to France? But if it *is* a real business and is here somewhere in Melbourne, it could be a way to connect with her. How, exactly, he had no idea. But it was something to go on. A glimmer of hope.

‘Been busy?’ Kate said, tamping the coffee. She seemed determined to engage him in a conversation this morning.

‘Huh?’

‘Busy – you know,’ she said, with another flash of that huge smile. ‘At work.’ Shit, Davin thought, *work*. He looked at his watch. *9.25am*.

‘Mate, where have you been?’ Tom Curtis said, easing into the café. ‘You’ve been late all week. Fatboy’s looking for you and I’m guessing it’s not to hand out a bonus.’

‘It’s been a weird few days –’

‘Haven’t you got the presentation to Prince today?’ Tom said.

‘God yes,’ Davin said, his heart sinking.

‘Mate, you better get moving.’

‘Oh, hello Davin,’ Roberts said, sufficiently loud for all to hear. He stood, hands on hips, centre stage in the client service section of the agency.

‘Morning Mr Roberts, I’m sorry I’m l–’

‘Yes, I know you’re late, *Davin*. Clients have been calling, *Davin*. I see emails to you from the front desk. Some of which arrived at 8am. These originated from the Receptionist who is paid half your salary to be here an hour and a half prior to your arrival. Come to think of it Grey, you’ve been late today, yesterday and the day before. That’s three days running. Have you struck a deal with my partner without me knowing? Awfully sorry for prying, perhaps I should have checked with him first to appreciate the scope of this new agreement. 10 to 4 with a couple of hours for lunch?’

‘I’m not sure what you mean Mr Roberts.’

Roberts’ face assumed a vermillion complexion. The client service team braced themselves silently at their desks, eyes glued to their screens with the kind of disconnected stare that people adopt in crowded elevator lifts.

‘It doesn’t matter what I *mean*, Grey. Why should it matter what I *mean*? You’ve been daydreaming all week – what the fuck’s the matter with you? We have the most *important* presentation this year for our most *important* client in a matter of hours and you’re in some sort of fucking hippie trance?’

The darkness of Robert’s pupils indicated he was on the verge of slipping into one of his famed ‘moments’ – episodes that almost always resulted in the unfortunate object of derision being ground under the sole of one of his scuffed brogues. Davin was readying himself for the impact, when he heard the lift bell.

The atmosphere changed in an instant as Graham Severson glided across the foyer, coat across one arm and leather satchel swinging by his side.

‘Morning all,’ Severson called out across the agency. ‘How’s my A Team today? Everything tickety-boo?’

When Davin turned back, Roberts was almost upon him. He stopped within an inch of Davin’s face. ‘Tomorrow, you’re here at 7. *Understand?*’

‘Yes, Mr Roberts.’

‘And if you fuck up the pitch this afternoon, I’ll feed your balls through the paper shredder.’

‘Yes, Mr Roberts.’

Roberts waddled away and Davin released a strangled sigh.

‘Lucky bastard,’ Tom said, shaking his head. ‘Saved by the boss.’

Davin dropped into his chair and stared at the computer screen. He could just make out his reflection in the monitor - tie askew, hair dishevelled, shirtsleeves rolled up. He looked strung out. He *felt* strung out.

‘For now,’ he groaned. ‘We still have to retain Prince Tobacco this afternoon. If we don’t – well, you heard him.’

‘How’s the pitch looking?’

Davin winced. ‘The ideas are great, but I still haven’t done an on-screen presentation.’

Tom’s eyes widened. ‘Mmm,’ he muttered. ‘Leaving it a little late, aren’t you? You’ve done all your media plans?’

‘No.’

‘Really? No PowerPoint. No media. The presentation’s in a few hours. You’re presenting to – how many?’

‘Ten.’

‘Ten stuffy, disagreeable pricks, and who are you taking from Creative?’

‘I’m not.’

Tom sat on the corner of the desk and leant forward to intercept Davin’s vacant stare. ‘You’re not going alone. You’re a good presenter Davin, but tell me you’re not fronting up alone.’

‘No. I’m going with Severson.’

‘*What?*’ Tom said. ‘You can’t be serious.’

‘Deadly.’

‘Not your idea, surely?’

‘His.’

‘Tell him you can handle it yourself,’ Tom said with bravado, but little conviction.

‘Jesus Tom, his name’s on the door.’

‘And he’s a fruitcake,’ Tom squeezed out the corner of his mouth, casting a stealthy gaze around the office.

‘*And* he’s the boss.’

‘*And* he’s likely to drop his pants in the meeting and sing the national anthem.’

‘I know,’ Davin said, dropping his forehead to the desk.

‘How tragic. Good creative and your inimitable capacity to cover the client in treacle may win them over, but just when you’ve got them on side and you’ve secured your employment for the foreseeable future, our fearless leader will wade in and screw everything up and, quite probably, lose the account.’

‘Well that won’t be my fault *entirely*.’

‘No,’ Tom said. ‘But a few days later, he’ll forget that *he* was the one who screwed it up, will call you into his office and sack you because he’ll remember that someone said or did something outrageous in the meeting that lost the account and since there was only you and him in the meeting, it must have been you, so you’re fired.’

‘So I should just resign now?’

‘Well, maybe I can –’

‘Where’s Davin?’ Severson trumpeted from along the corridor.

‘Here, Mr Severson.’ Davin sat up in his chair, straightened his tie and adjusted his keyboard, nudging the mouse to wake his screen.

Tom retreated quietly to the safety of his desk.

Graham Severson swung through a gap in the office partitions like a champion matador entering a bullring. He sported an exquisitely tailored, navy blue silk suit with fine pin stripes that fed all the way down to elegant Italian shoes. A claret tie and pocket-handkerchief punctuated the outfit. His lustrous tan nicely complemented a distinguished, healthy crop of dusky black hair parted immaculately to one side. Only a few stray silver flecks placed him somewhere between 55 and 60.

Severson was trim for his age – the product of many years of squash, running, climbing mountains and regular holidays to some of the great ski resorts of the world.

‘Ah, there you are, Davin. I’ve got some ideas for this afternoon,’ Severson said, brushing absently at the lapel of his suit. ‘Now, I’ve been –’

‘Sorry, I’m, err, not Davin,’ Tom said. ‘I’m Curtis, Mr Severson.’

‘Of course, of course,’ Severson said, frowning. He wheeled around and reviewed the faces of the stunned account managers in the room. ‘Davin?’

‘Um, here sir.’

‘Ah, *there* you are.’ Severson said, easing across the office. ‘Now, I’ve been thinking, Davin. *Brainstorming* you might say.’

‘Brainstorming?’

‘Yes,’ Severson said, with a crafty grin.

‘I’m sorry Mr Severson, I’m not sure I –’

‘Coming up with concepts Davin, for this afternoon’s meeting.’ He rested a hand on one of the office partitions. ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve donned the creative hat, but I love tobacco. Used to chew it when I was at university. It’s such an earthy product and it brings out the youth in me.’ Severson adjusted his pocket square and beamed at Davin.

A bead of sweat seeped from Davin’s temple. ‘But the meeting’s in a few hours and the creative has been finalised, printed out and mounted. I’m not sure that there’s enough time to –’

‘I’m seeing a girl,’ Severson whispered, conjuring his idea. ‘She has Harry Potter style glasses.’ Severson paused and raised an eyebrow. ‘You’re familiar with this Potter character, I take it Davin?’

‘Reasonably, Mr Severson, but –’

‘She’s wearing a cape and there’s an owl on her desk. It’s like a scene from The Chancellor’s Rock.’ Severson smiled and stared into the distance, lost in the vision he was creating.

‘Um, Philosopher’s Stone?’

‘But she hasn’t got a wand,’ Severson continued, lifting a hand to his vision. ‘That’s just what the audience will expect.’ Severson glanced down at Davin and winked. ‘This girl pulls out a cigarette and waves it around. And when she does –’ Severson paused, sweeping his hand back and forth with an imaginary, cigarette sized wand. ‘Things happen.’

‘What things?’

‘Magic, Davin. Magic and sorcery.’

‘Magic, Mr Severson?’

‘Call me Graham, Davin. We’re on the same team. I’ve always fostered the ethos of an egalitarian agency. Yes, there will be some computer graphics required. But it’s all the rage these days. Morphing and cloning and –’

‘Mr Severson, it’s just that –’

‘*Graham*, Davin. Call me *Graham*. We’ll be presenting as team S and R this afternoon. We must knit together like a bevy of brothers.’ Severson re-examined his lapel, brushing it once more for good measure.

Davin sat mortified, staring at Severson for any sign of this being a practical joke. ‘But Graham, you asked me to present and you indicated that you were only coming along as a show of strength, and to handle any general questions at the end?’

‘Good Lord Davin.’ Severson chuckled haughtily. ‘How long have you known me?’

‘Um, around 10 months.’

‘And in all the years we’ve worked together, how many times have you known me not to contribute to the flesh of the meeting?’ Severson formed a fist and shook it triumphantly.

‘I’m pretty sure this will be our first presentation together, so I can’t say that –’

‘Precisely. *Never*.’ Severson held an index finger up. ‘Let’s not ruin our winning formula Davin. You kick it off and take them through the Pointy Power stuff and I’ll chime in when we get to creative.’

‘But Graham, the creative team have • come up with a fully developed concept. It’s all mocked up and ready to go. Isn’t it a bit late to –’

‘Davin, Davin, Davin. I’ll have them eating out of their hands. Once I finish with them, they’ll be totally bewitched.’

‘Your hands?’

‘Huh?’ Severson said, surveying his palms.

‘Sorry, I mean, they’ll be eating out of *your* hands?’

Severson stepped a pace away, eyes wide. ‘You see what sort of a team we’ve become? You just said exactly what I was thinking – we have an obvious connection. Uncanny. Now, here’s the plan.’ Severson paused to consider the corner of Davin’s desk, sitting down carefully to preserve the immaculate press of his trousers. ‘We’ll have lunch together at the club, and oh –’ he stopped, eyes distant. ‘*Of course*. Toffy will be there and he can recite Harry Potter on cue, so it’s the ideal preparation. Then we’ll grab the Spider and spear across to the meeting. By my calculation, we’ll be back in the club by 3ish quaffing a loosener before dinner.’ Severson rubbed his hands together enthusiastically.

‘As much as I’d love to I still have –’

‘Nonsense, Davin. One cannot present award-winning material on an empty stomach. See you in the foyer at 12.’ Severson stood, tugged lightly on his cuff and ambled away.

Chapter Three – Noddyboard.

‘Call for you on line one Davin. I think it’s your mum.’

‘Thanks Sandy,’ he said, reaching for the handset. ‘Davin Grey.’

‘Hi love, I’m so sorry, I just used your real name with your Receptionist. I don’t think she noticed though.’

‘Mum,’ Davin said, softly. ‘We’ve talked about this before.’

‘I know, I know darling, but you know, it’s well, it’s –’

‘You OK? You sound a bit funny.’

‘It’s your father. His blood pressure’s up and he’s gone into one of those dark moods. Won’t talk to me. Won’t see the doctor. Won’t –’

‘Well you know I’d talk to him if I thought he’d take the call.’

‘I know that dear, but it’s going to take some time. Give him the chance to come around. I’m working on him.’

‘Mum, you don’t have to. It’s between him and me. He needs to see things from my –’

‘But you could also be trying to see things from his side too, sweetheart,’ she said, with a faint tremble in her voice.

‘Anyway, that’s got nothing to do with his blood pressure,’ Davin said, wedging the handset between cheek and shoulder as he sorted frantically through paperwork on his desk. ‘Can’t you get Dr Davis to drop by and just, you know, ask about his health?’

‘He’d see right through that and know straight away it was me.’

‘Stubborn old bastard.’

‘Don’t say that about your father.’

‘Let’s face it Mum, he is.’

‘That may be so, but that’s not helping.’

‘I tell you what,’ Davin said. ‘Why not ring Dr Davis and get him to pair up with Dad at the golf club? If they play in the comp together, he could drop it into the conversation. He’ll know anyway after five or six holes. Dad’s face will be as red as a beetroot.’

‘You see?’ she said. ‘That’s why I love you. You always have good ideas and think on your feet.’

‘Thanks Mum, now I really have to go. I’m under a bit of pressure with –’

‘Are you eating well?’

‘Mum,’ Davin said, ‘I really need to go. I love you.’

‘Love you too dear. I’ll give Dr Davis a call now.’

‘Great. Let me know how it all goes, will you?’

‘OK, bye bye.’

Davin continued pushing the papers around his desk, attempting to find something, *anything* that would give him some kind of start to a presentation.

Frustrated, he sat back and stared at his computer monitor. Maybe they'll postpone the meeting at the last minute. They often do, he reasoned.

On cue, an email popped into his inbox from J Alastase at Prince Tobacco.
Subject: *Re: Meeting Thursday.*

Davin couldn't believe his luck. He quickly opened the message, and after reading and re-reading the contents, slunk back in his chair.

'How goes it mate?' Tom said, rolling his chair alongside.

'I just got an email from Alastase.' Davin's eyes were lifeless as he stared at the screen. 'He's now invited the Chairman of Prince Tobacco to the presentation. I'm doomed, Tom.' Davin shook his head. 'One hour and ten minutes to prepare a sales and marketing theory, a creative rationale and a media outline. And I'm taking along the loosest of loose cannons with possibly the most ridiculous idea in the history of advertising.'

Davin sighed deeply. 'No, wait,' he said, raising an index finger. 'It is *definitely* the most ridiculous idea in the history of advertising. If I just had a decent strategy, I might get the original creative over the line before Graham jumps in. That's my only hope. But I *don't* have the strategy. And he *will* jump in and I might as well just resign and walk out now.'

'Never fear my friend, I have a solution.'

'You do?' Davin said.

'They'll be expecting a full blown presentation prior to your creative reveal, am I right?'

'Of course.'

'Market segments, Tarps, Brand Bullseyes and Brand Pyramids?'

'Oh god.' Davin said.

'But that's exactly what you're *not* going to do.'

'I'm not?'

'No. You're going to tell them that the customer doesn't have the benefit of a long-winded preamble before they see the ad on TV, *do they?* And you'll tell them that the work must stand on its own two feet, *shouldn't it?* You'll tell them that their time is valuable, just like the customer's time, *isn't it?*'

'I will?'

'You will. And then you'll flash up a Noddyboard.'

‘A Noddyboard?’

‘Yes, a Noddyboard.’ Tom leaned in close, lowering his voice to a whisper. ‘The secret weapon of the seriously underprepared Account Manager looking to somehow gain an edge where none exists.’

‘Just one question.’

‘You want to know what a Noddyboard is, don’t you?’

‘And whether we can pull it all together in one hour and eight minutes.’

‘OK.’ Tom glanced over his shoulder quickly. ‘A Noddyboard is a one page presentation with no more than ten dot points – single words that relate very simply to the objectives – leading your client, Pied Piper style, towards the creative. It makes it look like you’ve brilliantly distilled the whole process down to the core when in reality, you’ve just picked out a few key points from the brief they wrote themselves, massaging these points cleverly to skew the whole show toward your creative. They will love every point as you take them through it all because it’s largely what they gave you in the first place, and they will nod knowingly as you do so.’ Tom’s head nodded up and down as he smiled at Davin.

‘Hence Noddyboard,’ Davin said.

‘Yes.’

‘So let’s see if I’ve got this straight.’ Davin crossed his arms, reclined in his chair and looked to the fluorescent lights in the ceiling above his desk to compose the vision correctly. ‘You expect me to stand in front of the entire marketing team, the CEO, the Chairman of our major client – a client that represents a third of the billings of this agency and the livelihoods of fifty staff – together with the founder of our ad agency, and hang my hat on a single page presentation with ten words on it.’

‘Yes.’

‘When can we start?’

Chapter Four – Joe Average.

In the garish lift lobby of Prince Tobacco Towers, Davin compared his attire with that of his boss as they waited for the next available elevator. He made a mental note to put some money aside for new work clothes. But then, he considered, perhaps I won’t

need them if this meeting doesn't go well – which is a likely prospect given a complete lack of preparation. As he pondered the treacherous meeting that lay ahead, the lift chimed crisply triggering an overwhelming desire to dash for the door.

'Righto Davin,' Severson said, rocking from heel to toe and back again. 'Lead on and let's weave some magic.'

'Mr Severson, are you absolutely sure about this Harry Potter idea?' Davin searched Severson's face for the slightest trace of sanity. 'The creative we have is –'

'Graham, Davin. You simply *must* call me Graham,' Severson said, watching the floor numbers illuminate as the elevator gained speed in its ascent. 'I may be your employer, but it's critical that they see us as a team. With this concept, we are utterly invincible, Davin. I feel it in my waters. Is that the expression?'

'I believe it is.'

'In fact, we are just like those Macedonian chaps.'

'Sorry?'

'You know, the ones in ancient Greece with the overlapping shields,' Severson said, locking his arm through Davin's and pulling him close. 'Dashed difficult to get past if we gather tightly, like so,' he said, a fanatical expression seeping across his face. 'See what I mean?'

'Um, I think so?' Davin said.

'Good. We go into battle together. Hardened. *United*.'

'Of course Graham, but what I'm trying to say is that the original creative –'

'Yes, I've seen the work the creative team has supplied you with, and quite frankly,' he said, fixing Davin with an earnest eye, 'I don't care for it. And I can tell you now that our client will be equally underwhelmed. What's required is something that will appeal to the Joe Average in the street. I am that Joe Average and the Potter concept will appeal to all other Joes, both male and female,' Severson's voice rose confidently as the lift began to slow.

'Please don't take this the wrong way Graham, but there aren't many Joe Averages who live in a Toorak mansion and drive Ferraris. They *know* who you are and I'm not sure that you should suggest to them that you're –'

'Davin, Davin, Davin.' Severson eased his arm around the younger man's shoulders, leading him out of the lift. 'Being average is merely a state of mind, and in this mind of mine, I am so average that you could actually call me –' he stopped as if

he'd been slapped across the face with a fish. 'My god!' he said. 'I've just had a periphery!'

Davin searched the distant stare of Severson's gaze with trepidation.

'Epiphany?'

'You see?' Severson said, poking his index finger into Davin's shoulder. 'This is why we are Team Invincible,' he continued, his electric eyes flashing violently around the foyer.

'I'm not sure what you –'

'For this meeting Davin, I need you to refer to me as "Joe". You take them through the Powery thingo and the *faux* creative, then Joe will fly in like that Red Astaire bloke – remember the one that used to put out the fires on the oil rigs?'

'Um –'

'Joe will enter stage left, douse the flames with the Potter plan and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat!' He strode off with renewed vigour towards the reception desk.

'But Graham,' Davin hissed in a hoarse whisper, walking quickly now to keep pace with Severson, '*they know you*, I can't just start calling you –'

'Good morning,' the bottle-blond Receptionist chirped as the two men reached the desk.

'Yes indeed my dear, a grand morning it is,' Severson winked.

'You're here to see?' the Receptionist parted her lips and shifted forward in her seat in response to Severson's charm.

'We're from the agency for today's big marketing presentation,' Severson said, placing both palms onto the reception desk and looking deep into her cleavage. 'My colleague here is Davin Grey and you can let them know that he is being accompanied by none other than Joe Average,' he announced, with a crazed grin.

Davin's heart sank.

'I'll let them know,' she said, smiling broadly at Severson. 'Please take a seat, Mr Average.'

Beyond the low reverberation of Severson's humming, the dank tobacco stench in the reception area slowly invaded Davin's senses. It was a brown, dead scent that conjured a sequence of unpleasant meetings he'd endured over the last six months.

They all began with this oppressive odour that seemed to be trapped in the weave of the plush gold carpet. The client would make him wait in these gaudy gold reception seats, where he was force-fed Prince Tobacco cigarette ads on an obscene gold plasma screen before being eventually summoned to the conference room.

During this time, Davin had valiantly tried to infiltrate the impenetrable shell of the Prince Tobacco marketing team, but had been completely unsuccessful. Sitting here, waiting to be called once again into the conference room, it occurred to him that it was something he hadn't encountered before. In the two previous agencies he'd worked for, he'd always managed to coax a thorny client around through attentive service, a self-effacing, down-to-earth work ethic, and a dash of canny left field thinking. Like finding out which restaurant they preferred and inviting them to lunch. Maybe securing front row seats to see an entertainer they were known to enjoy. Or getting a football jumper signed by the favourite players of the team they followed. In almost every other situation, his clients loved him for it.

But that wasn't the case with the Prince Tobacco team. They were unlike any client he'd managed. They were obdurate pictures of efficiency. They slinked through the Prince Tobacco offices like cats sneaking up on birds. They smiled hello, yet their eyes were lifeless. They were demanding and unforgiving of the tiniest error. And today, he was to present to this very team a Noddyboard he and Tom had cobbled together in less than half an hour.

Davin glanced at Severson and to his dismay, his boss seemed totally at peace with the world. For god's sake, Davin thought, what was I thinking? Why didn't I invest more time in this pitch?

Of course, he was well aware of the answer. He'd spent the entire week in a sequence of daydreams – all of which revolved around finding that heart-achingly beautiful girl in that strange little car.

Hugo Barnes the Third was the biggest man in Prince Tobacco. Not merely in title, but also in physical dimension. He was larger than Hugo Barnes the Second and significantly more voluminous than the First, which was saying something because numbers one and two were of immense proportions.

With rolls of fat that oozed over the collar of his XXXL business shirt, Barnes was like an oversized Shar Pei puppy. His beady eyes darted suspiciously around the room as Davin took his audience through the single page presentation.

Davin's confidence had grown as the icy exterior of his audience had unexpectedly thawed with the emergence of the Noddyboard. They seemed to be agreeable to not having to sit through a protracted preamble. Encouraged by nods, Davin moved onto the creative proposals, where even warmer nods made him feel that a certain disaster had been averted.

Severson remained at the back of the room and had been silent throughout Davin's presentation, as had Barnes. Things were progressing so well that Davin was certain Severson had abandoned his plans to interject.

'So there you have it,' Davin said. 'A single minded approach and a clever concept that –'

'I don't like it,' Barnes suddenly croaked.

Davin was completely stunned. It was as if someone had leapt out from behind the curtains and zapped him with a Taser. For the first time ever, he had the Prince Tobacco marketing team on side. They were nodding, just as Tom had said they would. He had them on the verge of approval.

'Neither do I,' Severson said.

Davin gulped.

'Who the hell are you?' Barnes snarled at Severson, aiming a poker stare at him that would freeze a shot of vodka.

'Joe Average,' Severson said, calmly matching this stare. He then raised the stakes with a cheeky grin.

'Is this some kind of *joke*?' Barnes roared at the Prince Tobacco Marketing team, who, in unison, directed icy eyes at Davin.

'The only joke in this room is the creative work that my colleague has just presented to you,' Severson said, pushing his chair back and standing with arms wide. 'Gentlemen. *Ladies*. This creative is a foil.'

Barnes was not a man to be toyed with. He rarely attended meetings anymore. The only reason he was present at this particular meeting was that his weekly liaison with Mistress Number Two had been delayed by a couple of hours. Basically, he was killing time.

But the mention of the word ‘ladies’ by Severson momentarily stunned him, jolting him back to the true purpose of his excursion to this part of town. If one was able to jump into the mind of Barnes at that very moment, one would have been confronted with a vision of him, lying nude on his back, scented oils and honey cascading over vast layers of wobbling flab as Mistress Number Two bounced away on his ample midriff, thrashing his chest with table tennis bats to the beat of Frankie Goes To Hollywood’s *Relax*.

This mental diversion gave Severson sufficient time to jump to the head of the conference room table and stand aside Davin.

‘Thank you, my boy. Your introduction was brilliant and your strategy was sound. But now it’s *showtime*.’

Davin had little option other than to resume his seat and accept that his future at Severson and Roberts was about to be extinguished.

‘What’s going on?’ Barnes demanded, licking his purple lips. ‘I don’t have time for this crap, I’ve got important –’

‘Nor do I Mr Barnes, nor do I,’ Severson said, with a majestic air. ‘That is why I will quickly apprise you of the *real* creative concept. The one that will not only have people flocking to your brand, but will have you on stage at the next Advertising Awards night, arms laden with trophies, making grand acceptance speeches.’

Severson could scarcely have said anything more powerful. Barnes adored awards ceremonies – he was particularly partial to anything that involved a black bow tie and him placed squarely at the centre of attention. He salivated at the notion of winning awards of any kind and the potential for gloating amongst peers who despised him. The very mention of such award winning stirred his loins, although that may have been a consequence of a previous thought process. Nevertheless, his loins were stirring beneath several layers of blubber and Severson now commanded his complete attention.

‘How?’ he grunted.

‘Simple, Mr Barnes, simple,’ Severson said. ‘By appealing to the masses. I am not just Joe Average by name, I am Joe Average by nature. The trappings of wealth and position prevent me not from barracking with blue-collar chaps in the outer. I love a Dimple on the rocks as much as the next bloke. I am just as comfortable at a truck stop diner as I am at Jacques French Restaurant. I park myself in front of the

telly when the V8s are on and have the occasional flutter on the gee gees on a Saturday afternoon, and you know what?’ Severson said, with a wink in Barnes’ direction. ‘I’m just as partial to a bit of tits and arse as any red blooded bloke you’ll find anywhere in the world.’

Severson was in full swing now. Davin sat with mouth agape, as did the entire marketing team.

‘I cry when our swimmers win gold. I read the paper from the sport pages back. I pack Vegemite when I travel overseas and I am not ashamed to admit that I love nothing better than a good old-fashioned Romance movie to help me escape the rigours of the modern world. I am – I am – I am,’ stammered Severson, building to his crescendo, ‘I am Joe Average,’ he announced dramatically. ‘Hands up,’ Severson challenged, raising his hand high above his head, ‘who’s just as average as me?’

Davin stared. The Prince Tobacco Marketing team stared too, but there at the back, Barnes slowly raised his hand, nodding deliberately at Severson.

‘Welcome aboard Joe,’ Severson said, grinning at Barnes. ‘We like to be entertained, right Joe?’

‘Damn right we do,’ Barnes said from deep within the trance.

‘We like our ads to tell a story, right Joe?’

‘Love stories.’

‘The better the story, the better the ad, right Joe?’

‘Stories are great.’ Barnes said, following Severson’s every move with his little beady eyes.

‘And is there a story better than this?’ Severson turned away from his audience, put a hand into his suit pocket and slipped on a pair of circular framed glasses.

‘Joe – I give you –’ Severson said, wheeling around. ‘The greatest tale of them all!’

‘Harry Potter!’ blurted Barnes.

‘Ah,’ Severson said, holding up an index finger, ‘here’s where it gets interesting, Joe. It’s actually *Harriet* Potter.’

‘*What?*’ Barnes said, his eyes now so wide that a wave of skin folds had concertinaed across his cheeks.

‘And I give you,’ Severson said, reaching into his suit coat once again. He held up a packet of Prince Cigarettes, and between thumb and index finger, theatrically

extracted a single cigarette and held it up to his eyes with a look of wonder. ‘A wand that will weave magic throughout our advertisement and cast a spell on your audience.’

‘Oh my god,’ Barnes whispered. ‘It’s brilliant.’

‘But hang on, what’s the concept?’ ventured a lone voice in the Prince Tobacco Marketing team.

‘What’s your name?’ Barnes sneered at the owner of this lone voice.

‘Stevens, sir.’

‘You’ve got ten minutes to clear your desk and leave the building, Stevens. If you don’t I’ll have security beat the shit out of you and dump you in the back lane. Please go on Mr Average. I apologise for the interruption.’

Davin had a powerful urge to join an ashen-faced Stevens as he trudged out of the boardroom.

Severson, encouraged by Barnes’ obvious delight at the concept, began outlining the importance of high-level computer graphics and 3D effects. He would cast the net wide for the perfect female Potter. There may be owls, but that would depend on how many could be caught and whether or not they were the right colour. It wouldn’t be cheap, Severson warned, but award-winning material rarely is.

‘Surely there will be massive copyright issues?’ another brave voice ventured meekly from the other end of the table.

‘What’s *your* name?’ Barnes boomed.

‘Copyright? Good question,’ Severson said, effectively saving the job of the Prince Tobacco Marketing Manager. ‘Naturally we’re looking into it, but I see no problem that money can’t solve.’

‘Money is not an issue,’ Barnes said, dismissing any budget concerns with a wave of his podgy hand.

‘Davin will handle the negotiations with JFK Rowling,’ Severson said.

‘JK,’ Davin whispered.

‘UK, Davin,’ corrected Severson, ‘I want you on the first flight to the Old Dart, do you understand? Get in touch with her agents and set up a meeting.’

The throaty growl of the Spider was swamped in the cabin by Scottish marching tunes and Severson’s rich vibrato.

‘Look Graham,’ Davin said, shouting above the bagpipes. ‘I’m sorry I doubted –’

‘Great work Davin,’ Severson yelled back. ‘Told you we were a formidable team.’

‘But I –’

‘Davin, we need to address your future.’

‘My future?’

‘I see us working much more closely. I need a man I can rely on. Someone that shares my visions. We’re on the same wavelength. Our minds see eye to eye. I want you to start taking a lead role in this agency.’

‘That’s very kind of you to –’

‘Let’s celebrate with a cleansing belter at the club shall we? We can fill Toffy in on the results of his wise advice,’ Severson said, wrenching the Ferrari into a corner and roaring up to a set of traffic lights.

To Davin’s utter amazement, they pulled up next to none other than one of those strange little French cars owned by the very girl that had so thoroughly dominated his thoughts all week. It had the same absurd bug-eye headlights on sticks. The same canvas roof. Those wafer thin wheels. That snail-like shape. Except for the fact that this one was bright yellow, Davin was certain that it was identical in every other respect to the one driven by *her*. He craned his neck around and his heart skipped a beat when he saw that it even had the *Paris Motors* sticker on the rear window. So it *must* be a local business, Davin thought.

While Davin was processing this unexpected outcome, he was even more astonished when Severson thrust his head out of the Spider and blasted the horn.

‘Afternoon Jeffrey!’ Severson trumpeted, reaching across to turn the music down.

‘Graham! How are you old boy? Coming to the French Rally on Sunday?’

‘In the quarter finals of the club championships, I’m afraid.’ Severson said, waving his hand.

‘Good luck eh? Let’s catch up soon.’

‘Indeed we will, mon ami!’ Severson yelled.

The lights turned green and the little yellow car set off, banking at an extraordinary angle as it hugged the corner. Severson smiled as he watched it chug away.

‘Graham,’ Davin said, tentatively. ‘What kind of car is that?’

‘That, my boy,’ Severson said, wrestling the gear stick into first, ‘is one of the most remarkable vehicles ever made. A gift to the world from the Citroen mastermind Pierre Boulanger.’

‘French, right?’

‘As French as it gets,’ Severson said, accelerating away from the lights.

‘What’s it called?’

‘It is the 2CV– the humble *deux chevaux*.’

‘Der?’

‘Deux chevaux – or if we’re going to be picky, it’s the *deux chevaux vapeur* – hence 2CV. Literally means two steam horses.’

‘Why two horses?’

‘Well, the original model back in the 1940s approximated a two horsepower vehicle and was aligned with the French tax horsepower rating. They did give it a little more power over the years, although not *much* more.’ Severson muscled the Ferrari through second and into third. ‘But the exterior shape remained intact for nearly half a century.’

‘Many here in Australia?’

‘From memory, I think there are a few hundred sprinkled across the country.

Well that narrows the odds of finding her, Davin thought.

‘Have a couple myself sitting somewhere at the back of the garage,’ Severson continued, distantly. ‘One can never have too many Citroens,’ he mused, easing the Spider into the city. ‘Now Davin, give HQ a toot and let them know Team Victorious is off to the Club to indulge in aqua vitae.’

Chapter Five – The Numbers Theory.

Monique Freeman was the picture of a young woman supremely confident in her own skin. Whilst diminutive, her elegant, womanly curves exuded sexuality. With

shoulder length, sable hair that suggested European descent, high cheekbones and naturally long lashes that made her dark eyes pop, she required little makeup to accentuate her beauty.

It was rare that heads didn't turn whenever Monique walked into a bar, and today was no different, with two young men ogling her silhouette as she pushed through the doorway of Vue Bistro.

Waiters and waitresses zigzagged across the floor of the café, ferrying wine and tapas to tables brimming with twenty to thirty-year-olds in attire that divulged their city based occupations. There were lawyers, bankers, ad execs and financiers evenly split across the genders, all nursing naughty midday drinks and enjoying the buzz of a well earned Friday lunch. The lazy melody of a Miles Davis tune underscored the hum of the crowd, setting an easy tone.

Monique found her friend sitting in a low leather lounge at the back of the café.

'Why Miss Freeman, how delightful we look today,' Amy said, kissing Monique on both cheeks.

'Thank you my dear Miss Richards.' Monique beamed as she took a seat opposite. 'Am feeling just a little bit fabulous today.'

'Love the dress,' Amy said. 'New?'

'Yes. You like?'

'I do.'

A waiter appeared and took their drinks order. Monique studied his bottom as he disappeared into the crowd.

Amy shook her head, smiling. 'So, how are you my lovely?'

'Busy. We've had some big re-pitches lately. But it looks like we've retained them, so all good.' Monique looked away. 'Your father did an amazing job yesterday,' she said. 'Apparently pulled a rabbit out of the hat to save our biggest account.'

Silence descended on the table. Monique snuck a look at her friend. She leaned in and smiled softly. 'He actually saved a lot of people's jobs.'

'Yep,' Amy said. 'When I asked how you were, I didn't necessarily mean work.' Silence once again.

'You know he *always* asks me about you,' Monique ventured after a while.

‘Mon, I don’t give a damn really. And please,’ she said. ‘I don’t want you telling him anything about my life.’

Amy shifted in her seat, frowned at Monique and looked away. The return of the drinks waiter helped to defuse the mood.

‘So,’ Monique said. She tilted the glass of mineral water in her hand, clinking the ice softly, then adjusted her dress as she crossed deeply tanned legs. ‘Tell me about this cute new guy you said you like at your office.’

‘Hey, I just said he was cute,’ Amy said. ‘I didn’t say I *liked* him.’

‘Cute means like. Tell me about him. Good arse?’

‘You forgotten I’ve just started seeing Hamish again?’ Amy said, raising an eyebrow. ‘Remember him?’

‘*Hamish?*’ Monique said. ‘Please, Amy.’

‘What?’

‘Honey, he’s bland and boring and you deserve better.’

‘Look, he’s not *that* bland,’ Amy said. ‘I think I need to give it another try.’

‘You’re a sucker for wishy-washy men, I’m afraid.’

‘At least I can trust him,’ Amy said.

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ Monique said. ‘I’ve seen the way he looks at me.’

‘He’s probably just intimidated by you.’

‘I’ve seen the way he looks at other women too.’

‘It’s fine to window shop,’ Amy said. ‘Don’t we all?’

‘Speaking of which,’ Monique said, feigning a yawn, ‘tell me about office boy.’

‘What would you like to know?’ Amy smirked.

‘Hair?’

‘Blonde.’

‘Eyes?’

‘Can’t remember.’

‘You can’t remember?’ Monique eased forward and placed her glass on the table. ‘You *always* remember their eyes.’

‘No I don’t.’

‘Yes you do. How many times in the last few years have we sat here and you’ve talked about a guy’s eyes?’ Monique fluttered her eyelids at Amy and the two girls spontaneously laughed aloud.

'Blue,' Amy said.

'Arse?'

'Don't remember.' Amy looked impassively at the two young men watching intently from the bar.

'Bullshit, Amy.'

'Nothing to write home about.'

'Doesn't sound good.' Monique frowned.

'Look, if you must know, he's a nice guy, and he seems quite, well – genuine,' Amy said. 'Not that I'm interested.'

'Genuine isn't necessarily the basis for great sex,' Monique said. 'And yes, you *are* interested.'

'I don't want to have sex with him, Mon.' Amy smiled, shaking her head.

'Remember? I'm not on the market? Anyway, it's not *always* about sex.' Amy turned to gauge the travel of their conversation.

'Yes, it's always about sex. *Everything* is. There isn't a single thing in this world that doesn't ultimately come down to sex,' Monique said, in a manner that suggested to Amy she'd said as much many times before.

'Oh really,' Amy said, looking down at her shoes. 'Smelly feet,' she challenged.

'Smelly feet huh?' Monique said, with a sly smile. 'Easy. Smelly feet generally belong to active people. Smelly feet could actually indicate that someone has been working out at the gym. If they're exercising, they're getting slimmer and sexier. The slimmer and sexier they get, the more the opposite sex is likely to want to get them into bed.'

'Well,' Amy said, raising an eyebrow, 'this guy at work is quite slim and I don't want to have sex with him.'

'Maybe not, but the fact that you *don't* makes you judge him on the basis that you do or don't want to, so in other words, this whole office flirt is about sex, or in this case, that you've been subconsciously thinking about having sex with him.'

Monique sat back with a self-satisfied smirk.

'I don't think I understand that,' Amy said. 'What I do know is that I'm not flirting and I'm not thinking of having sex with him.'

‘Oh please. From the moment he opened his mouth at work, you were thinking about what it would be like to end up in bed with him. You can deny it, but it’s true. I know you.’

‘Good god,’ Amy lowered her voice, looking around nervously. ‘You make me sound like a deviant.’

‘Everyone’s the same.’ Monique shrugged.

‘No they’re not. *Some* would prefer to actually get to know someone before they sleep with them.’

‘So you’re going to get to know office boy before you go to bed with him?’

‘Yes.’ Amy said. ‘I mean, *no!* Of course not. I’m not going to bed with him. What is it with you and sex?’

‘Sex is the name of the game,’ Monique said, definitively. ‘At the end of the day, it’s just a numbers game.’

‘What numbers?’

‘Surely you know the Numbers Theory?’

‘*The Numbers Theory*,’ Amy said, laughing. ‘Pray tell, what is the Numbers Theory?’

Monique sighed. ‘Everyone has an invisible number over their head, and ninety-nine per cent of the time, when a couple gets together, their invisible numbers match.’

‘That’s it?’ Amy said, rolling her eyes. ‘*That’s* your Numbers Theory?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Life’s not that simple.’

‘Life *is* that simple.’

‘And you think it applies to everyone.’

‘Yep,’ Monique said, defiantly. ‘*Everyone* and every couple.’

‘OK.’ Amy nodded at the bar. ‘What about those two over there – the little bald guy and the tall redhead.’

Monique narrowed her eyes as she weighed up the couple – a slight, mid-thirties man sitting on a leather stool, with one hand resting on the hip of a willowy, attractive woman standing in front of him. She wore a revealing red dress, tapped a cigarette absently at an ashtray on the bar and laughed easily as he talked. Monique assessed them for a few more moments, then turned back to her friend with a confident exhale.

‘OK. In looks, he’s a four and a half. She’s a seven and a half,’ she said, with an air of authority.

‘So *they’re* the one percent your theory doesn’t apply to?’ Amy said.

‘I haven’t finished yet,’ Monique said, turning back to the couple. ‘She’s laughing, see? So he’s funny, that takes him to a five. He’s wearing a tailored suit with gold cufflinks and expensive shoes, so he’s got money. That gets him to six and a half.’

‘You said she’s a seven and a half,’ Amy challenged.

‘The dress is last year, she relies too much on her looks, so she’s got a boring personality. Oh,’ Monique said. ‘And she smokes. It’s a match.’

‘Can the numbers fluctuate?’

‘Absolutely!’ Monique frowned at her friend’s naivety. ‘He does a couple of bad deals and he’s back to a five and a half, she gives up the cigarettes and does 50 sit-ups a day to lose that pot belly and she’s an eight.’ Monique sat back and thought more about this. ‘That’s when she gives him the flick,’ she said, taking another sip of her drink to punctuate the point. ‘She’s still boring though, so maybe she’ll never climb beyond 8 unless she does something out of the ordinary like record a hit single, date a footballer or become a movie star. Then she’ll hit nines. The numbers are in constant flux. They can move daily, you know,’ Monique said, thoughtfully.

‘Daily?’

‘Hourly, in fact. What number did you give office boy when you first met him?’

‘I’m not playing this game.’

‘Excuse me?’ Monique pushed forward with a guileful smile. ‘You played it when you met him. Come on, what was his number at the start?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Amy frowned, feigning disinterest. ‘Eight. Maybe.’

‘Ooh! Good score to start off with. But not much of an arse, so back to a six.’

‘You give two whole points for a bum?’

‘The arse, my dear, is important.’ Monique was clearly affronted by her friend’s lack of knowledge. ‘You want something to hold onto,’ she said, giggling.

‘His arse wasn’t *that* bad. Actually, it was half OK,’ Amy conceded.

‘Seven then. Did he make you laugh?’

‘Well, not really, I –’

‘Six and a half. What does he do?’

‘He’s one of our Sound Engineers.’

‘Well paid?’

‘Um, pretty good.’

‘OK. On decent money. Back to a seven and a half, but people in your industry can be wankers, so down to a six and a half.’

‘Oh really? That’s rich coming from you. You live in the ad agency world, which, as you well know, fucked up my childhood. You’re lucky I’m talking to you at all,’ Amy said airily.

‘Oh *please*,’ Monique said. ‘This irrational hatred for advertising is tiring.’ It was a light-hearted dig, but it clearly changed Amy’s demeanour.

‘It’s an insidious industry,’ Amy said, the tone of her voice darkening perceptibly. ‘It *changes* people. My father was a beautiful man once.’

‘He still is you know,’ Monique said. ‘Look darling, marriages fail all the time. You need to get over it. Your parents are very different people. Your mum was a gentle soul and your father is –’

‘A bastard,’ Amy said. ‘He ruined Mum’s life with his relentless, selfish drive to succeed at the cost of his family.’

‘Oh come on, Amy,’ Monique said. ‘You can be so hard on people. He’s not *that* bad.’

‘He lied to her about everything,’ Amy said, shaking her head. ‘His affairs, his gambling –’ her voice trailed off, becoming raw and cracked. She reached forward and lifted the glass to her lips. ‘God help the man that ever lies to me. I’ll cut his fucking balls off.’

‘That was a while ago now,’ Monique said. ‘He’s changed.’

‘Oh really?’ Amy said, her frown deepening. ‘It was only two years ago that Mum died. Where was he when she was lying in a bed shrinking before my eyes? Where was he when I had to make the decision to turn the machine off? Wasn’t he in Europe or America, skiing or hiking or something?’

‘Not everything is as it seems, you know, he –’

‘She was *dying*, Mon,’ Amy said, her eyes swelling with tears. ‘How do you turn your back totally on someone you’ve spent most of your life with?’

‘I know, I know,’ Monique said, gently. ‘But what you never saw is how hard he took it. He really struggled through that time. I think in his heart, he still deeply loved her.’

‘Oh bullshit,’ Amy said loudly, causing the tables around them to go silent. ‘He went *traveling*. You organised the trip, remember?’

‘It wasn’t quite the trip you might think it was.’

‘I don’t care. Whatever the trip was, he needed to be there for me.’

‘He did try and call you, you know. He talked to me a lot about how to reconnect with you. How to –’

‘Too little, too late,’ Amy said. She pulled a tissue out of her purse and blew her nose quietly.

Monique sat forward and held out her hand, which was reluctantly accepted by her friend. ‘I’m sorry love.’

Silence descended on the table once again. Amy checked her phone, scrolling through emails while she regained her composure.

‘Change of subject,’ Monique said at last. ‘Back to this guy at work. Is he a wanker?’

Amy put her phone back into her handbag and considered the question. ‘Well, come to think of it,’ she said, ‘he *is* a little over the top in recording sessions.’

‘*Aha!* Has he ever asked questions about you?’ Monique said.

‘Umm, not really, he talks about work –’

‘Self obsessed,’ Monique declared. ‘*And* inattentive. Six!’

‘God, you’re unbelievable.’

‘Hey, I’m not doing anything we don’t do all the time.’ Monique said. ‘It’s part of the human condition. We’re forever assessing the numbers and trying to improve our own.’

‘Oh?’ Amy quipped. ‘So what’s *your* number?’

‘Right now? I’m an eight.’ Monique eyes flicked across to the two men at the bar who still watched on with interest. ‘But after implants I’ll be a nine,’ she whispered.

‘And me?’ Amy ventured. ‘Actually, no – don’t answer that.’

‘You’re a nine plus which I hate you for. Higher if you got yourself a normal set of wheels. By the way, where is *le ridiculous* car?’

‘If you mean Fifi, she’s at the mechanics.’

‘Get yourself something reliable,’ Monique said, rolling her eyes.

‘It’s a routine service for god’s sake – and she’s not ridiculous. Shit, that reminds me.’ She checked her watch. ‘Barry said she would be ready by 5. Better call.’