

‘There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter.’

Ernest Hemingway

Prologue

Now

“Go fuck yourself.”

Those had been Joe O’Connell’s last words before finding himself here.

Drifting back from unconsciousness, he returned from darkness only to find himself engulfed in a different kind – one that was virtually pitch black and imbued with a musty, dank smell.

He tried to lift himself from the seated position he was in, straining against the leather straps securing him in place. Iron ankle fetters tethered his legs tightly against what he recognised was a chair. His fingers felt around the arms to see if he could create any give in the straps but he gave up after a minute or so.

Something cold and hard was pressing against the soles of his feet. It took him a few moments to realise his shoes and socks had been removed and that the stone floor was the source of the chill.

Adrenaline shot through his body, jolting him back into a hyper-aware state. His muscles, though appearing to be unresponsive, had retained their innate ability to twitch and contract, causing him to shiver in the chill of the cold air. His memory sluggish, he briefly recalled where he had been before here - the compound – and visualised seeing Maxine in front of him. He remembered the pressure of the needle as it punctured the skin of his neck and the soft call of insentience as it had engulfed him.

Joe began to writhe about violently with no effect. The chair remained static as though fastened to the floor. His eyes were still trying to adjust to the gloom of his surroundings. He screwed them up a few times to see if it would help him focus and make sense of anything.

He was able to discern his location was either a storage container or perhaps a huge silo. There were slatted windows on either side of him but no light through them, meaning either they were covered or it was night time.

It felt like night time, though he couldn't articulate why. Perhaps his somnolent state was due to the residual effects of whatever he had been sedated with to get him here. As if on cue, the injection site began to throb and he tried to angle his neck in order to rub it against his shoulder. It wasn't as effective as scratching with a finger, but it would have to do. Joe knew he had much bigger problems to worry about.

Part of him wondered if he was dreaming. That he was somehow in the middle of a nightmare he was yet to wake from. Recent events rolled around his mind – Etchison, the Branch Obadians...Maxine – but he failed to see how any of that could have led to this.

Being here.

In this room.

As a child he had always been terrified of the dark. Nyctophobia. The word itself had always reminded him of a creature that could be lurking within the nights obsidian embrace. A nyctophobe...a nyctosaur. He had come up with all sorts of names for them. Supine creatures that lurked beneath your bed or in the wardrobe. He could feel it rising now, the grinding anxiety that accompanied that fear, the most basic of limiting mechanisms to prevent reckless behaviour in the most extreme of

circumstances. An evolutionary advantage that prevented you from running around the African desert like a lunatic when there were lions present.

His fear of the dark had never prompted an acute fight or flight response. Instead it had always developed more like a foreboding prescience, creeping up from the base of his spine and slowly enveloping his chest like an anaconda trying to squeeze the very breath from his body. Ironically, that increasing anxiety also augmented situational awareness, making someone finely attuned to danger and able to respond to situational cues when their wellbeing might be in danger.

No shit.

Fear – a gnawing emotion, honed over millennia by both nature and nurture so that it became a systemic and instinctive survival response that could prepare you for the world and ensure that you would intuitively do whatever you needed to do to survive – to live another day.

Or die another day.

Either way, fear was the body's way of making certain you never forgot what was needed to go on living. Oddly, none of that was helpful as Joe sat here with a hunch that what was about to follow would be painful...and possibly fatal. An old Simon and Garfunkel lyric inexplicably popped into his head.

'Hello darkness, my old friend...'

He heard breathing in the obscurity before a light blinked on above him, causing phosphenes to appear in bursts before his eyes. His vision blurred, he could just make out someone stood in front of a table at the end of the room. He could also make out the figure patiently laying out a variety of medical implements that Joe knew weren't there to help him with his ingrowing toenail. The stranger was built like a rugby player, the muscles on his arms threatening to rip through his tightly buttoned

black jacket.

“So, that’s how far we’ve come,” announced the man gently in a soft British accent, his back still to Joe. “Heroism has gone from a rallying cry or profound statement to ‘go fuck yourself’? And you call yourself a journalist. Shame on you.”

“Get bent,” Joe snorted derisively, straining futilely once again at his restraints.

“You’ve caused me a great deal of trouble, Joseph. I should have killed you when I had the chance. However, your being kept alive was not my decision and is something I now plan on rectifying.”

His right hand floated over the various items as though trying to decide which one to choose. He settled on a scalpel and turned back to face Joe, his face hidden in the shadows.

“I’ll never tell you whatever it is you want to know,” Joe stated emphatically. “Besides, I met Obadiah Stark. I can already tell you’re a rank amateur compared to him. I don’t even think you’d be interesting enough to make him sick.”

The man stepped forward and pressed the scalpel against the right-hand side of Joe’s neck in one, swift motion. His black hair was cut close to his head, flashes of grey along the temple. Freckles peppered his tanned face, vivid blue eyes belying clarity of purpose. His mouth was turned up slightly as though trying to force a smile.

“This area I’m pressing against is called Erb’s point, named after Wilhelm Heinrich Erb who located it. It’s basically where the four nerves of the cervical plexus meet. And if I just make a small incision here...”

Joe cried out as the scalpel slid into his neck, severing the nerve cluster with the immediate effect of making his right arm tingle as though immersed in freezing cold water. He felt it go limp, his hand automatically rotating and flexing up over as

though gesturing for a tip.

“...you’ll find you’re paralyzed down your right arm. Incidentally, this injury affects the circulation, which means your arm will no longer be able to regulate its temperature, so in cold weather it’ll hurt like a son of a bitch.”

Joe grimaced against the pain reverberating from his neck and up and down his right side. His body shook with pain and adrenaline, though he imagined his old friend fear was also playing a part.

“You know,” the stranger said, his voice lilting softly. “I’ve never actually killed anyone before. Never even laid a finger on those cattle I procure for my clients. You would be my first...breaking me in so to speak. Your actions have potentially damaged my reputation. It’s that reputation which has contributed to the confidence of my clientele in dealing with me, knowing I’ll provide them with a superior product, exactly as requested. And, in one deft move, you could have FUCKED IT ALL UP!”

The man began shaking, hitting himself on the head in frustration. Joe couldn’t help but smile at the fact that his actions, despite the pain and fear he felt, were having such a profound effect. He just wished he knew who his assailant was.

“So what happens now?” Joe asked glibly. “I say sorry, you let me go with my limp arm and we call it quits?”

“I admire your ability to find humour, even in such a despairing state,” the stranger announced, the angry tremble in his voice rapidly receding. “It’s endearing actually. But you know what’s about to happen. You’ll be tortured and tell me what I’ve been paid to find out.”

“Which is what exactly?” Joe countered.

“The truth. And I have something that’ll help you locate it.”

“I’ll die before I tell you anything,” Joe stated defiantly.

“Oh, I know you will,” his aggressor announced proudly. “Die that is.”

He moved back to the table and swapped the scalpel for a series of bamboo slivers before moving to the back of the room out of Joe’s sight.

The sound of a chair being dragged resonated around the room before the man appeared before him and sat down, rocking the chair forward slightly so that they were directly in front of each other. He ran a finger along the tops of the bamboo, the motion making a barely audible clicking sound that Joe found extremely disturbing.

He felt the sweat beginning to build up on the back of his neck, his increasing respirations causing him to feel lightheaded. Joe realised his irrational fear of the dark had been just a minor apprehension compared to this. If he didn’t know better, he would have said he was having a panic attack. Joe suddenly found himself wondering if it was possible to die from fear.

The man selected one of the bamboo slivers, placing the others on the table to his left. He positioned it just below the index finger nail of Joe’s right hand.

“In case you haven’t guessed yet, this is going to hurt...a lot.”