

Bradford II – Badlands

Chapter 2 – 7 East Central

“As a child, Bradford’s father had taken him for walks around their town. He’d taken him right to the top of Cemetery Hill and pointed out parts of town, declaring that; ‘There be dragons son.’ It was a game, a way to amuse a child that cost nothing but a little shoe leather. Those trips changed young Bradford and set him on his path through life. He looked at those areas of town and made a solemn promise to his father; ‘One day I’ll kill all the monsters in our town.’ He was only seven years old, but it was a promise he intended to keep.”

⊖

Bradford nearly always slept well, but there never seemed enough hours in a day to get the job done and have eight hours solid sleep. It was how things had always been, dreaming of the day he became high enough up the greasy pole to get a proper night’s sleep. The dream had come true, he was now running all of PD489, with promises from the president that one day, he’d be in charge of every arm of the security services of San Pablo. The problem was that he still seemed to run on four or five hours sleep a night and the birth of Rosa, wasn’t likely to improve things. It was six thirty in the morning and as usual, he woke before the alarm went off.

“I’ll start breakfast. You need more than flapjacks from Roland this morning.”

He turned and saw that wonderful face, surrounded by untidy bed hair and once again, wondered how he’d ever been that lucky. There had been quite a few women in his life, usually sort lived affairs. Amoe hadn’t been scared by the numerous scars on his body, just accepting them as part of him. Perhaps he’d always been destined to marry another cop.

“Don’t disrespect Roland.” He replied. “His coffee and flapjacks every morning, have kept me going for the last few years.”

He leant towards her and winced a little. There had been no rough stuff with Hector, but climbing up all those ladders to the top of Pandan Bridge, had taken its toll. They kissed, long ago agreeing to ignore each other’s morning breath, though he suspected Amoe often got the worst end of the deal. The kiss went on and his body began to respond. He forced himself to pull back.

“Sorry.... The car will be here at eight.”

“No problem, I’ll put some coffee on while you shower.”

Sex still happened, but now they had to do it slowly and carefully. The rough and tumble sex they both loved, was likely to be a long way in the future. Really good sex, the sort that causes you to scream out to God, was like some promised land in the future. Amoe had even put a tentative date on a piece of paper, stuck behind a magnet on the fridge door. Bradford got up and showered, before dressing in much the same clothing he’d worn as a PD489 grunt. There were good clothes in the office, just in case the president called for an impromptu meeting. As a grunt he’d carried a cop gun, a Henriksen 80, which fired intelligent bullets. Each round cost a fortune, but civilian deaths from stray bullets during shootouts had dropped by eighty percent. The public loved intelligent rounds, but the cops tended to hate them. Not every guy supposed to be on the side of law and order was necessarily a good guy. Bradford now carried a state of the art Ion blaster, guaranteed to hit and kill anyone you aimed it at.

“Breakfast is ready.” Shouted Amoe, from the kitchen.

They’d shared the duty of making breakfast, which tended to mean coffee and waffles, the only thing he didn’t burn or ruin. Now Amoe was home until Rosa came kicking and screaming into the

world. Not that cop maternity pay covered much. Amoe had inherited a small fortune from her father, including the entire block of luxury apartments, where she'd lived in 11 Ocean. They now used her old apartment as a weekend place by the ocean. Amoe felt safest in his crappy apartment in 7 East Central though. He considered her to be safe there too, now that Camila had taken over as leader of the Hyenas.

"Why not take Camila onto the payroll as your partner." Amoe had once snapped at him. "You hired Bobby Laszlo and that McBride woman."

She always referred to Gillian as that McBride woman. For some reason they'd fallen out, though he never had found out why.

"Bobby isn't on the payroll..... He's an External Consultant."

They'd laughed and one of their few minor conflicts had ended. Bradford was the boss now and the boss didn't go out on cases or have a partner. Camila was his cop partner though, in all but name. Officially she was still his cleaner, now owner of a large and legitimate cleaning company.

'Making San Pablo Clean Again.' Was her company moto.

They had managed to eradicate skin bugs in several areas of San Pablo, but the damn things were tough and kept coming back. She'd also cleaned out other pests.

"The transition will be bloody and short Bradford. You have my word."

The Hyenas had been a predominantly black gang, mainly teens doing a little drug running and petty crime. Adults had stepped in and taken over, once there was serious money to be made. The Hyenas had quickly become a curse, killing and maiming to hold onto their territory. Camila had been the cure, killing a dozen of the leaders and replacing them with her own people.

"You can't turn a blind eye to it Bradford.... You're a cop for fuck sake." Amoe had yelled. "She hung four of the Hyena leaders under the expressway."

A fairly major conflict between them, when she'd still believed in following the rules, playing the game. That had been then and now Amoe realised that there were no totally good or completely bad guys in San Pablo and even President Herbert accepted bribes. It had taken his wife two years, to realise the way to live a happy life in San Pablo, was to accept that everything and everyone, was a shade of grey.

"A month and 7 East Central will be safer." He'd told Amoe then.

It had taken Camila six weeks to take over the Hyenas. Since then there had been few gang related killings and no one else found hanging under the expressway. Peace was the order of the day in his neighbourhood and although people still locked their doors at night, most people let their kids play in the street again.

"Oh, what is he promising now ?"

The large screen on the kitchen wall was usually kept to low volume, but Amoe turned it up, once President Herbert appeared. She wasn't a fan of his, after finding out just how dirty her father had been and that Herbert was involved in some of it. Bradford had dealt with some of that heat for Otis Herbert, gaining himself a trusted place as a friend of the president. He quite liked Otis and it didn't hurt to have friends in high places.

"He's going to announce the first construction permit at the edge of the Badlands." Said Bradford.

"Crap ! No one will want a house out there..... With the bugs, snakes and subversives."

"They will, if they're trying to raise a family in somewhere like Longmont, or 32 East. A clean new apartment out in the Badlands will appeal to a lot of people. Though Doug DeFreitas isn't doing it as an act of charity."

“Oh him, I should have known he’d be behind it.” Said Amoe. “Anyway to earn a few more Herberts.”

Back in his second, or maybe his third term as president, Otis Herbert had put his own face on the back of the San Pablo one dollar note. His political opponents had objected of course, but the picture was still there and the San Pablo dollar was known on the street as Herberts.

“Given the land free, provided he builds an agreed number of housing units.” He said.

Amoe gave him a look which conveyed her feelings about Douglas DeFreitas and his housing units. Doug was from old money San Pablo and about as close to royalty as there was in the New Nations. Bradford didn’t want to give his wife another reason to dislike Herbert, but felt he owed her the complete truth.

“The president hopes new homes in the Badlands will discourage too many from trying to move out to the Islands.” He told her. “That is just between us Amoe.”

Having a wife who disliked the president was one thing. Having her tell everyone about his various crooked deals was something different and unlikely to be good for his career.

“I knew it !” She yelled. “That man..... Oh, they’ll need to screw him into the ground when he dies.”

They watched and listened to that famous voice, as the president outlined his vision of homes enough for everyone in the reclaimed Badlands. It made sense of course to use the vast area of desert wilderness in the centre of the island. The problem was that the job of moving the subversives out and keeping them out, had been given to PD489.

“I actually think he’d make a better president than Otis.” Said Amoe.

Bradford tended to agree, though he’d never admit it. It was a tradition that Pastor Ivor came on after the president to give his own alternative view on life in San Pablo. It was as much a tradition as Christmas, or the Annual New Nation Games. The Old Cathedral still offered a drink and a meal to anyone in need and Pastor Ivor had managed to cultivate some wealthy donors. Bradford had called in a few times over the years, to drink bad coffee and talk over the news with Pastor Ivor. Bradford’s communicator beeped, his car was waiting in the car park.

“I really will try to get home at a civilised hour.” He said.

One of his father’s sayings. He was sounding increasingly like his father as the years went by, which worried him slightly. His father had been a good cop and a decent father, but no one wants to sound like their parents. Bradford kissed Amoe, before bending down to kiss the bump. It had become part of their morning routine. He had an idea.

“Can you get to Sticky’s for lunch ?” He asked.

“Yes, that’ll be good. I haven’t been there for ages.”

Amoe saw him to the door, waving at one of the neighbours. Once there had been a device above the door, a squib placed to give a warm welcome to anyone trying to break in. Things might not have become perfect in 7 East Central; there were still places no one visited at night. On the whole though, it was now a reasonably safe place to bring up a kid. His PD489 car and driver were waiting in the car park. A methane burner of course, his hatred of battery driven cars was well known.

“Good morning Bradford.”

He hated being called Sir and most of the people who worked for him, now called him Bradford. Ideally he’d still be driving his motorcycle to work, but the security people had actually reported him to some kind of official committee.

“Just not safe enough on two wheels.....A discreetly amour plated car should be your usual method of transport.” He’d been told.

So his beloved hydrogen cell powered bike had been left in the PD489 garage. He still used it of course, but in secret when going out to investigate the cases that weren't officially his.

~ ~

He was based at the headquarters building now, no longer working in an anonymous office block, between the sanitation department and the people who gave out parking fines. The PD489 main building was beside a grassy plaza, in the better part of City Central. There was even a brass plaque near the automatic front doors, with PD489 etched into it in italics. Being public had its drawbacks though. Every item in the media about his operatives using excessive force or brutality, usually led to a large demonstration on the grass just outside the front door.

"Do they expect us to deter subversives with nothing but harsh words?" Gupta said, often.

Bradford was dropped off right in front of the doors, his face visible to anyone with a camera.

Another victim of the new public image, had been his own anonymity.

"Like it or not, you're the public face of PD489." President Herbert had told him.

At least the new office block had air conditioning which worked better than the last place. It wasn't perfect, but his shirt no longer stuck to his back on summer afternoons. There were still those annoying lights turned on by motion detectors, but you couldn't have everything. Monday mornings were usual quiet outside their building. It seemed indignant protesters hated Monday mornings as much as everyone else. Bradford placed his palm on a plate near the doors and they hissed slightly, as they smoothly opened. He liked that, it made up for the annoying power saver lights.

"Morning Lori."

"Morning Bradford."

No intern on the front desk anymore, trying to answer the phones and cope with reception. His department had a little spare cash, so he'd hired two full time receptionists. Lori was by the far the most efficient. He took the elevator right up to the eleventh floor, the top floor. Roland would have coffee and flapjacks ready of course. Roland's efficiency was as certain as death and taxes. This was a good thing, as Bradford hated admin and did his best to avoid it. Roland was waiting in his office, aircon already humming away. A tray with two coffee cups and a plate of flapjacks, was at one side of his desk.

"Morning Roland, anything going on I need to know about?"

"The president upstaged you a bit, but most of the media has your escapade at Pandan Bridge as their top story." Said Roland. "Someone took a good picture of you leaving the scene."

"Have they shown a picture of Amoe?"

"No, they're sticking to the rules on family and friends. Her image was removed from all the pictures."

"Good. Anything else?"

Roland had a tablet, which he referred to as 'the battle box.' It linked into everywhere, even the mass surveillance data collected by Maria's department. From that single tablet, Roland could and had, organised some highly complex operations. Bradford munched his flapjack, drank his coffee and listened to the significant security related problem that had arisen over the weekend.

"It all sounds nicely routine." Said Bradford.

"Just as well, a third of our personnel are dedicated to clearing out the Badlands. It's tough out there Bradford, one team were fired at by a large railgun. Yasmine was wounded."

Yasmine again, that girl was as bad a bullet magnet as Gupta. They really did suit each other, which made it a pity that they'd broken up a few months earlier.

"How bad was she hurt?" Asked Bradford.

“Nothing major, just another small scar to add to her collection. But we lost another armoured personnel carrier. It’s hell out there, a full on warzone Bradford.”

“I know Roland, but if Otis wants the Badlands cleared..... We clear them. Did you get my late night message about Hector ?”

Of course he had and no doubt acted on it in his usual efficient manner. The Gods might occasionally be fallible, but Bradford was certain that Roland never was. Roland didn’t look happy though.

“As instructed I informed all our colleagues in the security services, that Hector Pérez, AKA Crowman, was killed while trying to escape from the cells beneath this building. I have lodged a death certificate with records and attached several pictures of the body.” Said Roland. “We’re not popular though, a lot of people mumbling about PD489 going back to how we were in the bad old days.”

“Really ?”

Bradford couldn’t help grinning. He often looked back on those times when PD489 was a totally covert part of the police force, as golden years. Little paperwork and no one to explain things to, apart from the president.

“I don’t think they meant it as a compliment.” Said Roland. “Maria has called at least three times, accusing you of stashing Hector somewhere. Up to your old tricks she said, several times.”

“Really ? She really said up to my old tricks ? I’m sure she’ll forgive me, just not today.”

Roland was trying to look aggrieved, but eventually they both laughed, while Bradford poured his PA a cup of the excellent coffee. At one time Roland had been another rule follower, convinced that the world was all about light versus dark, with no areas of grey allowed. After years of exposure to Bradford, he behaved like a changed man. He even sold their unwanted kit to Bobby Laszlo, so that they could buy tech they did need. Yes, strictly speaking it was corruption, but they did manage to obtain some state of the art weaponry.

“I will fend off Maria for a while.” Said Roland. “Eventually you will have to talk to her though. Without the link into her surveillance data.....”

“I know Roland, I know.... I’ll call on her tonight; maybe even take a bottle of Devils Promise with me. For now I need to get down to the basement. This morning I’ll be in the building and then lunch with Amoe at Sticky’s. As for this afternoon ? I’ll try to keep you informed of my whereabouts.”

That was how it was when you were the boss and expected to make key decisions on the fly. No privacy, your location always known, or at least known for most of the time. Sometimes it felt like being a newly released criminal, with a locator chip in his neck.

“Give Amoe my best.”

“I will.”

Bradford finished the flapjack he was eating and shoved another into his pocket, before heading for the elevator. He needed to press his palm against a wall sensor to gain access to the basement garage and stores area. There was a lot of nasty stuff kept in the stores and a journalist had been caught rummaging through it. Now the basement had security a bank would be proud of.

“Morning Bradford.” Said Miram.

“Good morning Miram. How’s my bike ?”

“Ready to go.”

He liked Miram. At one time Roland had controlled the stores, on top of all his other duties. They’d managed to poach Miram from the military and she ran the garage and stores, like a well-oiled machine. Plus she understood the whole kit recycling thing with Bobby and appreciated how useful it was. A large lady who’d broken an intern’s jaw for an unspecified act of disrespect. Crap ! It was

impossible not to like Miram. He had to look at his bike on the way through the garage. Fresh hydrogen cells fitted and ready to drive up the ramp and onto the street, according to the service sheet on the wall.

“Soon old friend, we’ll be off into the Badlands together.”

The bike had been a sort of present, bought out of cash acquired by selling..... It was a long and involved story, which had left him owning a state of the art hydrogen cell motorcycle. The bike was three years old now, there were faster and more powerful models, but he had no intention of selling it.

“A bike like that is barely run in after three years.” Miram had once commented.

It had a Harley-Davidson badge on the tank, which was nonsense. That company had long gone, but the name still meant quality to keen bikers. The name had been recycled and as the original Harley-Davidson company were now gone, no one was likely to take legal action for stealing the brand. On a side panel was a CCST badge, the company who made just about all hydrogen cell bikes in The New Nations. Everything was like that now, the bestselling luxury brand in San Pablo was Gucci. A local Gucci of course, with everything made on the island. Bradford left his much loved bike and walked down another ramp and into the part of the stores where hazardous materials were kept.

~ ~

Hector Pérez had liked being part of Dysto-Guerra and he had thought of Samuel as a modern messiah. He hadn’t even disliked being called Hector, until Samuel had re christened him, making him The Crow and eventually Crowman. He’d been a faithful subversive, until Bradford had killed Samuel. It had to mean something though, didn’t it ? He’d been sure that Bradford had to be some sort of avenging angel at the very least. Rumour was that Bradford had taken on Samuel in single combat. Even if half the rumours were bullshit, they still pushed Hector’s mind in one constant direction. Bradford was the true messiah.

“I’m hungry and sick of being chained up like a dog.” He yelled. “Will one of you bastards at least give me something to drink ?”

They hadn’t put him in a cell, though there was a bed for him to sleep on. No toilet though, just a large plastic bucket, but at least it had a lid on it, which reduced the smell a little. There was a large danger sign on the wall, with ‘Corrosive Materials,’ written on it. Genuine or just there to freak him out ? If it was a scare tactic, it was working.

“I know my rights ! I want a lawyer..... NOW !”

No answer, though there had been sounds somewhere. The noise of a heavy engine being started and revved up, the clang of hammers against metal. They’d blind folded him, but you can tell if the stairs go down and an elevator going down has a different feel to one going up. He was deep in the bowels of the PD489 building, he was sure of it. A storage room with double doors made of metal, which had actually been left open.

“Not much use with this fucking chain round my ankle.” He muttered.

The chain went through an eyebolt in the wall and effectively limited his movements to the bed and the bucket. The doors were a good twenty feet away and might as well have been in another country.

“Let me out or feed me !” He yelled.

The chain was thin and very shiny. He’d already pulled, yanked and stomped on it. He’d even chipped paint off the bed frame with his foot, trying to use it to snap the chain. The thinness gave false hope though, he hadn’t managed to even scratch the metal. He gave the chain one more hard stomping, before giving up.

“What is all the noise about Hector ? I heard you right out by the elevator.”

Bradford, his onetime employer, come to inspect the prisoner. Hector tried to look unconcerned, but he had been on his own for a while and it was nice to see another human.

“I know the rules Bradford and you guys are supposed to be legit now.” He said. “I want a proper breakfast and a lawyer.”

Bradford actually wandered over and sat on the edge of his bed, as if they were still buddies.

“Sorry Hector, the dead have no citizenship rights and you are official dead old buddy. A death certificate has been lodged with the authorities, there was even an autopsy.”

“Yeah, right !”

Bradford removed a small personal media player from his pocket and a flapjack with a few pieces of pocket fluff attached to it.

“Here you can have half my breakfast.” Said Bradford. “Watch the recording while you chew. Don’t damage the player, it’s my personal property. Smash it and we really will fall out.”

The flapjack was delicious. He pressed play and the perky weather girl came up, the once who did the forecast on ZMB San Pablo.

“Delicious huh ? I told you so.” Said Bradford.

“Alright, though I need a drink.”

“I’ll get someone to bring you a proper meal and a drink when I leave.”

Once the weather girl had said there was a six percent chance of rain in West San Pablo, it was back to the news. Susan someone or other, who did the early morning slot on ZMB.

“.... And anger today as PD489 kill yet another suspect in custody..... It was really believed the organisation had got its act together..... Hector Pérez shot while trying to escape, or so we’re being told..... PD489 spokesperson denies a return to the bad old days.....”

The recording ended and his hands were actually shaking. Once you were officially dead, they could do anything they wanted with you.

“See !?” Said Bradford. “You’re dead.”

“What sort of shit is this ? You owe me Bradford.”

“Yes I do Hector and I am truly sorry that it looked like PD489 threw you to the wolves. It wasn’t deliberate, but someone should have looked for you far sooner. Though I stopped owing you anything when you put a bomb over your shoulder and carried it up that bridge tower. There are easier ways to get attention old buddy, we’re in the phone directory now.”

“I just wanted to be remembered Bradford.... No one forgets a guy who blows up a bridge. Not that I had the bomb to get the job done. It looks impressive and weighs a ton, but your tech people will tell you..... It would probably just have killed me and left a dirty mark on the bridge.”

“And killed me Hector. Was that your idea ? Kill us both and get your name all over the media.”

“Probably, though I’m not sure if I had any real plan. I was just fed up with being ignored.”

“I’ll get you that drink.”

Bradford went, returning with a large bottle of water and two mugs with adverts for office stationery on them. After filling a cup for himself, he handed the bottle and second mug to Hector.

“Do you want a job Hector ? I could do with you on my team again.”

“You’re joking. Thanks to you, everyone I dealt with knows I was working for the cops. Plus I’m now dead, or did you forget about that ?”

Bradford drank some of his mug full of water and looked straight at him. It was an unsettling look, as though he was wondering if it might be easier to kill him for real.

“Do you have any real options Hector ? I could keep you here almost forever, having the bucket emptied once a day. Or if I admitted to still owing you a little, which is a big if. I could have you released into the Badlands, to survive as best you could. Or I have a plan, if you’d like to hear it ?”

“Fine, tell me your plan ?”

He must have arranged it when he’d gone for the water. A young man appeared near the doors, carrying a tray and there was the wonderful smell of a freshly cooked breakfast. Bradford took it off the young man, bringing the tray over and laying it on the bed.

“Good food, we have an arrangement with a place half a block away.” Said Bradford. “The same place president Herbert eats, you should feel honoured.”

Bradford carried on leaning against the wall as he ate. The food was good, though he suspected it was all to put him a mood to accept the job offer.

“First you’d need a new face.” Said Bradford. “We have access to the same people who work on witness protection. Some really good people who can make a few subtle changes. Bones now rather than the flesh on your face. A little change to you cheek bones and jawline and your mother wouldn’t recognise you. Some drugs to help you heal, courtesy of the military bio people and you can be a changed man and out of here in two days.”

“Sounds good, but I’d get a full new ID right ?”

“Oh yes Hector, and a bank account, a decent salary and a credit rating to be proud of. Plus I’ll even throw in a chunk of spending money to get you started. Are you going to be my guy out in the Badlands Hector ?”

Considering the alternatives, it sounded like a good deal.

“Fine I’ll do it, but can I have a code name or something ? I’m sick of being called Hector.”

“Well.... It can’t be Crowman. Any ideas on what you’d like to be called”

“How about Raven ? I heard it on an old movie once, it sounded alright.”

“Fine, you’ll be known as Raven. I need to know though, where did you get the bomb ?”

“Oh that ! I was just trying to piss you off by not telling you. I knew it was a dud when I bought it, about five or so years back. I got it from Krueger who used to sell arms out of a car park in 32 East....Until he got shot up and died one night. Probably killed for selling dud bombs.”

“Krueger.... I should have known it.”

“So Bradford. Now I’m working for you again. What do you want me to do in the Badlands ?”

“You must remember Camila from your days with Samuel ?”

“Yes, into all that old time religious stuff. She has a daughter who we all knew was Samuel’s, so everyone treated her really well. Eggshells Bradford, like walking on eggshells.”

“She’s running the Hyenas now Hec.... Raven and also working for me.”

“Ahh, taking over everything Samuel once had.”

“No, it’s not like that. You will be dealing with her quite a lot and it’s still eggshells time. Be polite and obey any instructions she gives you. I want you to become known as a reliable guy out in the Badlands. Don’t get too involved in one place, no working your way up the hierarchy. Just get known everywhere as a useful man to have around. I have plans forming Hector and you will be playing a big part in them.”

“Raven, it’s Raven now.”

“Whatever. I’ll send someone down to give you an ID card for the building and show you around.

Don’t wander about until they arrive, or you might get shot.”

“The chain makes wandering a bit difficult.”

“Dancing goats in a tree.”

“What ?!”

“There never was a thin but unbreakable chain. All in your head Raven, something the guys in interrogation have been working on.”

“Crap !”

It had gone, there wasn't so much as a mark left on his ankle. Even the eyebolt in the wall had gone.

“Wait for the ID card Hector, we'll talk later.”

~ ~

Gillian McBride now managed the laboratory and tech research division of PD489. She'd brought three of her old friends and colleagues from LabSinc4, though most of the top scientist had died in the battle on Lakey Island. For people expert in bio-tech, modern weaponry was a hole in their knowledge which had needed filling. Bobby Laszlo seemed to know every weapon ever produced, but he had other claims on his time, aside from being Bradford's external consultant.

“I know this Ms McBride.” Said Tony. “Made by Krueger as one of his little side lines. Nearly everything he made was a dud, especially his squibs. I'm just amazed that Bradford didn't kill him before Bobby.”

Tony was Bobby's key enforcer, though he wasn't that keen on the phrase. He happily came into the PD489 building with little notice and his knowledge of everything that went boom or bang, appeared to be encyclopaedic. He was polite too, always calling her Ms McBride. His only flaw seemed to be a complete lack of any moral compass.

“Bobby, our Bobby Laszlo you mean ?” She asked. “He killed him ?”

“Well..... He was selling duds.”

He said it as though that excused Bobby of all blame in the matter. Tony had the bomb in bits, the explosive charges removed and made safe, all in less than ten minutes.

“See the blue oscillating lights ?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“All show Ms McBride, but they really look the business. Those lights were one of Krueger little inventions to impress the gullible.”

She didn't like mentioning that everyone who'd seen the device had been sure it was a lethal high tech device, probably because of those blue lights. Bradford entered the lab, walking over and looking at the newly dissected bomb.

“Don't tell me.” He said. “One of Krueger's infamous duds.”

“I bet you recognised it right away.” Said Tony.

“I'd love to say yes, but Hector just told me who he bought it from. Said he got it about five years ago, or thereabouts. Does that sound right to you ?”

“So you did stash Crowman away, I knew it. Little Vic now owes me fifty Herberts. The timing sounds about right and Krueger has been dead for over two years.”

“Did you know Bobby killed him ?” She asked. “Our bobby.”

“Well he did sell duds Gillian.” Bradford replied. “I used one of his squibs when running from half a dozen well-armed subs. Put a squib above a door and you expect it to take them out. You don't expect it to cover their faces in soot and make them even angrier. If it hadn't been Bobby..... Someone else would have killed Krueger, sooner or later.”

Gillian wasn't going to say anymore on the subject. She'd carried out augmentations to Bradford and there had been others she knew little about. If he was occasionally a monster, it was partly because LabSinc4 had made him that way.

“The military want a look at the bomb.” She said. “Can I send it to them ?”

“Fine, though don’t mention that we know where it came from.” Said Bradford.

~ ~

Sticky’s was a diner known to all the cops in San Pablo. The sign above the door said Ace Diner, but everyone knew it as Sticky’s. It was in a bad area of the city, one known to have a bit of a gang problem. There were always at least three or four police vehicles outside Sticky’s, so Bradford happily parked his beloved bike right outside. Amoe already had a window table and was frantically waving at him. It was a good diner, the food was fantastic for the price, but the neighbourhood put the general public off. Then there was the owner’s attitude to general maintenance and hygiene. The large windows had a patina that gave everything viewed through them a hazy look. In one corner there was a bullet hole. So old it had long been forgotten if the protagonist was firing out or firing in. At one point in time, someone had blocked the hole up with putty. Likewise the tables weren’t cleaned that well and elbows had been known to get stuck to the plastic table coverings. That is how every cop in the city knew the place as Sticky’s.

“I haven’t ordered yet.” Said Amoe. “All the staff wanted to ask about the bump.”

“Come into the office and a few hundred of my guys will do the same.” He replied.

The food was always good and arrived quickly. Busy cops only ever get an hour for lunch and Sticky’s knew that. He ordered a lasagne and Amoe decided to try their fried chicken.

“It’s so good to get out and I must go into the office and see Gillian. I’m a bit late seeing her for the final scan and tests.”

“She’s thrilled you’re trusting her to deliver Rosa.” He said. “Her team have even set up a small nursery area. They’ll look after you better than any expensive maternity clinic.”

“I know.... I erm.... Looked Gillian up. I know she’s the best.”

“We’re lucky to have her as a friend.” He said.

Fencing around each other, both of them not wanting to mention the truth, especially over lunch in Sticky’s. Amoe was a fit and healthy young woman, but his DNA has taken quite a beating over the years. All that fiddling about by LabSinc4 and the conditions he’d worked in. His child was going to be normal though, he’d told himself at least a thousand times over the last six months. Every test, every scan had been normal, but there was still that nagging doubt. Gillian was good though, she’d know how best to look after Rosa, if.....

“Your lasagne looks so good, can I try some ?” Asked Amoe.

She tried some of his food and declared it perfect and he did the same with her fried chicken. It was all part of their lunch at Sticky’s ritual. People moan about things being routine, but often it’s the little routines and rituals that stops life from driving them completely crazy. Bradford’s communicator beeped, Roland trying to contact him, urgently.

“Damn, he wouldn’t call if it wasn’t really important.”

“Take it, I understand.”

Lunch with just about anyone else and he’d have gone outside to take the call. Amoe was his wife though and he had few secrets from her. He sat listening to Roland, as he gave him an accurate and succinct outline of the latest minor disaster. Bradford looked down at his half eaten lasagne at one point, hoping Amoe wasn’t reading his expression.

“You’re certain about the identity Roland ?” He asked.

“It’s our guys Bradford, using the latest field analyser. There is no room for error.”

Now of all days, though on any day it would have been bad news. Amoe had finished her chicken, so at least he wasn’t dragging her away from a half finished meal.

“Did you drive here ?” He asked her.

“No, I used a cab, one of Camila’s people.”

Damn, good that she was using a trusted cab service, but he needed privacy to talk to her. Sitting her on his bike just wasn’t private enough.

“We need to talk.” He said. “Once I’ve paid the bill.”

There was a grubby concrete trough outside, which had once been full of flowers. A rare try at making the place look more attractive, by the owner of Sticky’s. Now it was just a trough full of dry soil, just the right height to sit on. It was an awful place to talk to her, but it was better than watching her crying inside the diner.

“What happened Bradford ? Has there been some kind of disaster ?” She asked.

“Douglas DeFreitas went missing last night. It was on the warning lists, but he wanders around the Badlands quite a bit and always travels with at least four heavily armed guards.”

“Ewww that awful man.”

“I tend to agree with you. As you know, we’ve got quite a lot of people out in the Badlands, clearing out various areas for construction work to begin. They were doing a routine search of the area and Doug did turn up, but dead at the bottom of seismic hole. Just about every cop in San Pablo is out looking for his security team. My guess is that they got offered a lot of cash to kill him.”

“Can I say good and not sound a complete bitch ?”

“Oh yes you can and I wasn’t exactly depressed by the news. There is something else though Amoe, something that affects us both, personally.”

He was dreading telling her, wondering how badly she might take the news. If he had to, he’d take her back to the office and get Gillian to give her something. If only that particular seismic crack had closed up.

“They found another body in that hole in the ground, not far from Doug DeFreitas. They used a med analyser on some bone marrow and came up with a name. There is no chance of it being an error. They found the remains of your father.”

She didn’t cry, but Amoe had always been tougher than most people realised. She’d been a cop for years, which would give any woman a thick skin and emotions of steel. Amoe held his hand, squeezing it for a while. He waited for her to talk.

“We all knew he was dead of course.” She said. “No one like my father just vanishes for years, unless they’re dead. There can be a funeral now. My mother will be able to say goodbye to him.”

Please don’t ask if he suffered. Bradford knew that two blaster shots to the chest was fairly instant, but he was beginning to feel two years’ worth of guilt, in less than a minute. And there was going to be a funeral to attend.

“Has the story been given to the media ?” She asked.

“Not until you’ve had a chance to inform your mother.”

“Good..... I’ll come back to the office with you and call her from there. I can see Gillian too, the final few tests seem more important than ever now.”

“I’ll call a cab.”

“No, I’ll go on the bike. I miss the wind across my face, haven’t been on your bike in ages.”

No use arguing and he didn’t want to. The closeness on the bike was nice, the bump that would be Rosa, right up against his back. Amoe put her arms round him and kissed his neck.

“Rosa says no speeding.”

He kept to the speed limits and obeyed every stop sign.

~

~

