

24

Saturday, 21 October

THE ESSENCE OF FRESHLY roasted coffee was tantalising. Savouring its aroma, Paul studied the photograph of Chaplin behind the counter. The picture showed the quirky actor dressed as Adolf Hitler and doing what appeared to be a satire of the dictator, peering quizzically at a globe of the world. Paul squinted as he tried to read the words underneath.

The barista stood at the coffee machine, with his back to the photograph. A wiry man in his fifties, he waited patiently before giving Paul a nod.

‘The Great Dictator,’ he said, relieving him of his trivia dilemma. ‘1940. One of the turning points of his career. He never really recovered after this film, it all got too political. What can I get you?’

‘I wouldn’t have guessed, don’t know much about him,’ Paul replied. ‘Way before my time. I’ll have a latte, thanks.’ He reached for his wallet.

‘Make that two,’ a voice behind him said darkly.

Paul stopped dead. The voice sounded oddly familiar, but much deeper. His shoulders tensed as the hot breath brushed the back of his neck.

‘Yes, you know,’ it said quietly. ‘You know it’s me.’

The mouth moved closer, to just above his right ear. ‘Don’t worry,’ the voice whispered. ‘I’m not that stupid. I wouldn’t smack you here.’

Paul’s mind raced. Aaron was standing so close it was suffocating. What his intentions were, he couldn’t tell. It had been years, decades,

since they'd spent summers together and their lives had long since drifted apart. The man behind him now, calling the shots, was essentially a stranger. He needed to act quickly, and under pressure he could think of only three immediate options.

He could fight.

From the descending breath Paul sensed his earlier height estimate was a little bit off. Aaron was at least ten centimetres taller than him. His shoulders and chest were probably broader too. Gone then was his chance to pick an easy fight and be sure to win. He was also at a disadvantage. He'd have to spin and punch in a single move and with Aaron almost conjoined at his hip he wouldn't have room for a good swing. Maybe he could drop, turn and launch a left uppercut to the underside of his jaw like a Jackie Chan reverse karate chop. But if Aaron was ready, the taller man could flatten him with one foul overhead thump. That option wasn't such a good idea.

He could flee.

Such a move would require extraordinary dexterity coupled with some pretty fancy footwork. Given he was currently trapped between Aaron and the rear counter, he would need to duck, spin and sprint five metres in and around tables, chairs and customers and out a potentially closed shop door. With one grab Aaron could have him prone, and from that position he would have the full weight and force of his opponent on top of him. While he could use the element of surprise to dash off, his winning history was based on starting all challenges from a strong position. If Aaron was ready he could neither startle nor stampede. This option was also out.

That left only one remaining viable alternative – to buy him a coffee, as he demanded, and hear him out.

It was an ambush.

Slowly he nodded to the barista. 'Make that two,' he repeated reluctantly.

The barista looked over Paul's head to his new friend and back at Paul. He gave him an odd smile. 'Would you like anything else?' he

asked, handing him a number 2 skewered to a long silver stand.

‘No thanks.’ Paul tapped his card and waited, trying to look relaxed. His chest pounded.

‘Sure. Take a seat,’ the barista said, motioning to an empty table by the wall. ‘I’ll have it brought over.’

Paul walked stiffly to the table and took the chair facing out. It was a long way to the front of the shop, but from this position he could at least see an exit path if it was necessary.

Aaron followed and sat opposite. He had grown from the spindly kid Paul remembered into a tall, solidly built man. At close range, his dark hair was a lot thinner on top and there was a touch of grey at his temples. Fine creases stretched from the corners of his eyes to his hairline, and deeper lines ran across his forehead, many more than he expected for a man in his mid-thirties. His eyes carried a heavy look and their dark gaze remained fixed on him.

The two sat staring at each other in silence.

‘So where’s Kyle?’ Aaron asked without the usual pleasantries. His voice gave nothing away.

Paul straightened himself in his seat. He hoped it added a few centimetres.

‘He’s dead,’ he said coolly. ‘Died in a car crash.’

Aaron processed this.

‘How long ago?’

‘When we were twenty.’

Several moments passed again where neither spoke.

‘So you drove him to the edge like a lemming?’ Aaron asked bluntly.

‘No, he got into drag racing and he lost control,’ Paul retorted. ‘I didn’t do drag stuff. I wasn’t there.’

‘No need to be defensive.’

Paul’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’re accusing me,’ he replied. He could feel his confidence rebuilding. Looking down at the table, he reached with great purpose for the napkin in front of him and carefully folded it into an origami snake then placed a fork on it, holding it in place.

He smiled quietly at his handiwork.

‘Excuse me,’ interjected a waitress. ‘Two lattes?’

Paul nodded, and she placed the coffees down, returned the fork and napkin to their original positions and walked away.

Paul disregarded the undoing of his masterpiece and selected the sugar. He could feel Aaron’s stare burning a hole into the top of his head.

‘What did you do when you lost your buddy? Or should I say your shadow?’ Aaron asked when the waitress was out of earshot.

‘I moved on.’

‘Did you find a replacement?’

Paul briefly contemplated mentioning Lewis, but the guy had less than half the venturesome spirit of Kyle coupled with the personality of a bored mortician. He dismissed the idea.

‘Plenty,’ he replied boldly. ‘But they’re hot babes now.’

Aaron’s ineffable hatred for his adversary was now thinly disguised behind a façade of forced cordiality. ‘What did you do when you left school?’

‘I got a job.’

‘In what?’

‘What is this, the Spanish inquisition?’ Paul interrupted. ‘It’s like the third degree.’

‘I’m just catching up.’

‘Why?’

‘Isn’t that what friends do?’

‘I don’t recall us ever being friends.’

‘Really?’ said Aaron, feigning surprise. ‘So why did you always come to my house? Was it for a joke, or was it with malicious intent?’

‘That’s uncalled for.’

‘Is it?’ Aaron leaned back on the chair. ‘Considering the circumstances, I don’t think it is.’

Paul changed the subject. ‘How about I ask you some questions? Why did you leave school?’

‘My mother couldn’t handle it anymore.’

‘How is your mother?’ Paul tried to set a light tone to sound polite.

‘She’s still around,’ Aaron replied coldly. His black eyes shone.

‘Where does she live?’

‘In a nursing home.’

Paul was momentarily taken off-guard. ‘In a home? Isn’t she a little young to be in one of those? What, she’d be just in her sixties or so?’

‘She never recovered.’

‘Really? Who would have known. You visit her?’

Aaron suddenly fired up. ‘I’m not giving you any more details on my family so you can inflict more pain,’ he said bitterly.

Paul leaned forward and fixed his eyes on Aaron directly. ‘It was an accident,’ he said slowly and precisely.

The two stared at each other, neither wanting to back down.

‘It was *no* accident,’ said Aaron, matching Paul’s inflection. ‘There should have been consequences for what you did. You should have been put away.’

‘For doing what exactly?’ asked Paul, maintaining his glare.

‘You lured him to the water, and I have no doubt you pushed or pulled him in.’

‘The kid came of his own accord.’

‘The KID was my BROTHER!’ Aaron shouted, startling several nearby patrons. ‘You should have looked after him like he was yours!’ A waitress who was approaching turned on her heel and scurried away.

‘Yes, *Daniel*,’ said Paul. ‘Not *my* brother. We’re not related.’

Aaron’s nostrils flared and the veins on his neck pulsed. He eyed Paul venomously. ‘Decent people care about others, whether they’re family or not.’

‘I thought you cared about his swimming. Whatever you taught him didn’t work, he was crap at it. Your big brother skills really left a lot to be desired.’

‘He was just learning!’

‘He couldn’t swim. We didn’t know this.’

‘You and that asshole Kyle didn’t try to find out!’

‘We were kids too,’ said Paul lightly.

A red and white mottle flooded Aaron’s face. ‘You were older. You should have looked out for him! But instead, you enticed him, a small child, into flowing water where he couldn’t cope. You were lucky you weren’t found criminally responsible.’

‘We were ten, for God’s sake.’

‘That’s no fucking excuse!’ Aaron almost choked. ‘You’re just god-damn lucky that ten was the statutory minimum age. You bloody well knew what you were doing. Even as a juvenile you knew right from wrong, and you shouldn’t have escaped prosecution!’

Paul waited while Aaron took several deep breaths to calm himself. He could see his hands were shaking, but the café was busy and he felt confident now that Aaron wouldn’t try to swing a punch. He couldn’t see on this angle if he was concealing anything under the table but he doubted it would come to this. If Aaron had intended to kill him, he’d had twenty-four years to do it. Why would he wait until now? In fact, that was a good point. There seemed to be no purpose in digging this up – Daniel was long dead and life had moved on.

‘Is this what you came to town for? To see me?’ he mocked.

Aaron tensed his fists. ‘You shouldn’t promote yourself that highly,’ he said, his voice now under control. After a moment his face cooled and his tone changed. ‘I came to help a friend with his business and while I was here, I wanted to eyeball you. Now I’ve done that I have seen enough.’

Leaving his half-finished coffee, he rose to leave. Standing next to the table, his towering figure almost completely blocked the view.

‘So you still hate me,’ Paul baited.

‘Well,’ said Aaron slowly, ‘part of that hatred will never go away. But it’s more than that. The fact is, I pity you. You haven’t changed.’

Aaron reached into his wallet and flicked a business card in Paul’s direction. It landed upside down on the table beside him.

‘If you have anything else to say, here are my details,’ he said coldly. Without a further word he turned and walked away.

Paul waited until Aaron was out of sight before he drew a long sigh of relief. He turned the card over. On the front was a head-and-shoulders portrait of Aaron dressed in a smart business suit, a faint smile playing on his lips. To the left of the photo were a few short words which read '*Aaron Smith, Personal Injury Lawyer, LLB FAAL.*'