

Corporate Blue

A Novel

by Daniel Myers

Part One: The Good Ol' Days

One

My first day on the job with those nutcases, I was greeted by the loser's end of a very large handgun. A more intuitive man would have taken that as a sign to turn around and just walk away, to leave that place and never think of it again. It would have been the wise thing to do.

In my own defence, however, I could point out that I didn't have a lot of options as to where I could turn. The President of the United States, and what I imagine were his Homeland Security Goon Squad, among others, were pissed off with me and I didn't think I would be welcome back there any time soon. The best thing to do, I figured, was to lie low and make the best of a new situation in a new country. In time — a year max I figured — it would certainly all have blown over. Forgiven and forgotten. They would let me back in. They would let me come home.

The 'new country' was New Zealand. My 'new situation' right now was me looking into the gaping barrel of a particularly unforgiving looking weapon. Attached to the opposite end of the gun — the end with the trigger — was a gentleman who looked every bit the battle-scarred veteran gone off the deep end. It was not so much the hunting jacket, the military fatigue pants, the week of untrimmed beard, or the unkempt collar-length hair that gave that impression, as much as the feral, hunted look in his eyes.

'This is about to be your worst day ever, flyboy,' he said through clenched teeth.

Raising my hands slowly, without making any sudden movements, I took a step back. 'Maybe I should go check in with security first,' I said, though I had no idea where security was. Indeed, even by American standards, security here seemed a bit lax for an airport. The door at the base of the control tower was unlocked and I had just walked in.

There didn't seem to be much of a threat when I arrived. At barely 8.30 on a Monday morning the airport appeared lifeless. No wind, no airplanes taxiing, not a soul to be seen. The lingering patches of ground fog accentuated the stillness and, like

the tumbleweed rolling through a ghost town, added that final touch of emptiness, of a place once filled with life now hollowed out and long forgotten by time.

I had considered the possibility that I was in the wrong place, that maybe this was just an abandoned airfield and the Milton Gorge Aerodrome I was looking for was farther down the road. This place looked like a throwback to the Second World War. Large Quonset hangars and wood-frame buildings, all weather-beaten from the years, lined the perimeter on three sides. The control tower, a sad looking structure from a bygone time, stood between the two huge runways that crossed in a lopsided X. Its wooden walls showed the marks of many years of neglect. A tattered, chequered flag hung limply from the pole on one corner of the roof.

The door was open, so I had walked in and, seeing nobody in the office downstairs, I had climbed the stairs to the next floor. The tower was not tall as far as control towers go — just three stories — but then anything higher would have been unnecessary on this size of airfield. On the second floor were the ladies and gents toilets, and another room, a general-purpose area with a refrigerator, sink and cupboards to one side. On the opposite side was a table and some bookshelves filled with ancient, rotting binders, and an assortment of cheap looking paperbacks and magazines, the only cover of which I could read from my vantage point was for *New Zealand Pig Hunter*. I had continued up the stairs to the top floor — the tower cab. Except for the creak of the floorboards, there was not a sound — no hushed voices coming from the top of the stairs, no radio chatter. Again, I was convinced the place was deserted. A few steps from the top, just as I had peeked over the railing to get my first view inside Milton Gorge Tower, I had found myself attracting the unwanted and sudden attention of a guy who looked like he wasn't interested in taking any hostages.

‘Are you one of them?’ the gunman asked me.

‘No,’ I said, not really sure to whom his ‘they’ referred, but reasoned that a psychopath would probably never consider ‘them’ as allies. ‘I’m one of you, I think — possibly less violent, but definitely unarmed.’ I glanced at his trigger finger, which I thought I had just seen twitch.

He narrowed his eyes and studied me as he held his aim for several long, disturbing moments. His eyes dart quickly to his right toward the door to the catwalk, and then back to me. The tension in his face relaxed slightly as he studied me for a moment longer. Then he made a sudden move to his right, kicked the door open, levelled the pistol at a building on the far side of the taxiway and fired.

The gun was a signal pistol used for firing flares and, in this case, bird-scaring cartridges that make a whirring noise until they explode with a loud bang at the end of their trajectory. The trajectory, again in this case, ended about fifty feet before the door to the building.

I eased myself down to a lower step, so I was just high enough to see the building through the window without making myself an exposed target of retaliation.

‘I need to wake these bastards up in the morning,’ he said, staring at the building, then turning his attention back to me, with a crooked smile and leaning back against the doorframe, pistol hanging loosely at his side.

‘Who? Who do you need to wake up?’ I asked in my calmest, most patronising impression of a hostage negotiator, as I stole a glance across the wide expanse of grass and tarmac. Through the thin puff of smoke that briefly hung in the air in the spot where the cartridge had exploded, a couple of men dressed in the blue uniform of flight instructors emerged from the front door of what I now decided was a flying school and began waving their arms, gesturing rudely and yelling something in the direction of the tower. Although distance made their words indistinct, even in the silent, still morning air, their meaning was obvious. I ducked down so they could not see me and inched my way down yet another step.

‘I don’t think those guys liked your wake-up call.’

‘They never do,’ he said. ‘Never mind. By tonight I’ll have bought them a round at *The Tie Down* and they’ll have forgotten all about it.’ He glanced back at the gathering mob of instructors and grinned. ‘Until tomorrow morning, that is.’

‘You do that often?’

‘Sometimes,’ he said. ‘After all, we *are* supposed to test the signal pistol on a regular basis.’

‘I see,’ I said, nodding as I glanced down the stairs, wondering whether I should just leave before I became any more involved.

‘He’s still mad about his car,’ the gunman added without encouragement.

‘What car?’

‘Brandon, the short guy on the left,’ he pointed out one of the five or six people still making rude gestures toward the tower. ‘I set his car on fire a few months ago,’ he explained, shaking his head. ‘It was an honest mistake, if you know what I mean.’ He winked at me as if I knew what he meant. ‘You’re tired after a ragged night and you reach for the wrong cartridge. You load a flare instead of a bird

cartridge. Next thing you know ... kaboom!’

‘Kaboom?’

‘Haven’t you ever made that mistake?’

‘Well, no, I haven’t, but we never used ...’

‘Well, that’s what makes you a better controller than me, mate. You would probably have known the flares have a longer trajectory. Anyway,’ he glanced down, looking almost melancholy for a moment, then shrugged, ‘Christ, it was only a Corolla. And he had to go and have it painted that awful pea-green colour. God, what an eyesore! So,’ he turned his attention back to me and, still holding the pistol, folded his arms across his chest, ‘I can see by your outfit that you are a cowboy,’ he said in a poor mimic of my American accent and in reference to a song I wouldn’t expect any New Zealander to know, ‘which means you must be *our* cowboy.’

‘My name’s Tom Hardy,’ I took a step up and leaned over, cautiously offering him my hand, unsure if that was a good idea.

‘I’m Flynn.’ He switched the pistol to his left hand and gave my hand a quick shake.

‘I’m a controller, I was supposed to —’

‘I know who you are. We were expecting you months ago.’

‘There was red tape — getting a visa and all that. I came as fast as I could.’

‘So the only question left is: Are you in or are you out?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Were you hired before or after the big change? The big “switcheroo” as you would say.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever said “switcheroo”.’

‘It makes a difference, you see. I mean, we were expecting you a while back.’

I had no idea what this guy was talking about. Without having to overtax my ability at logic, I could have told him without looking that it was his own Civil Aviation Authority that had hired me — it wasn’t like there was going to be more than one government agency hiring controllers. Maybe he wanted to know the name of the person who signed the letter, but even that seemed a trivial matter. I patted myself down until I located the letter in my back pocket, extracted it and held it out to him. As I guessed, it was from the Civil Aviation Authority offering me a position at Milton Gorge Aerodrome.

‘Hmmm, CAA.’ Flynn shook his head. ‘That’s not good.’

‘Why not?’

‘It was before the New World Order.’

‘The New World what?’

He handed the letter back to me and grinned. ‘Ah well, no worries, mate. She’ll be right.’

‘Who will? Do you know something I don’t know?’

Flynn shrugged. ‘Not me. They never tell me anything around here. Anyway, welcome to the end of the line. Welcome to Exile Tower.’

‘Is this Milton Gorge Tower? Maybe I misread the directions.’

‘It’s Milton Gorge, mate,’ he said, but his attention was distracted elsewhere. Something had caught his attention, something like a voice inside his head that no one else could hear. It was the way he cocked his ear up toward the open door — the flight instructors had all wandered back into their building, so it wasn’t them. Then he slowly turned his attention to the sky and squinted.

‘No fucking way,’ he said. ‘Not today, you old son-of-bitch.’

I looked at the spot that had drawn his attention and then I saw it too — an elongated spot on the sky, hard to see in the glare of the sun, but I had spent enough years of my life looking for tiny specks in the sky, to take notice. I couldn’t make it out. It had to be an airplane, perhaps just passing by, en route elsewhere. But there was something wrong. It did not appear to be moving, but growing. Then I squinted into the glare. Not *one* airplane, but two, three, maybe more.

Aside from being an air traffic controller, I had once been a pilot and flight instructor. In the cockpit, there is a moment — the briefest of all moments — for which the pilot must always be ready. If an observed target appears to move forward through the pilot’s field of vision, the observer will pass behind the target. If the target appears to move backward, the observer will pass ahead. The target that appears stationary is on a collision course, and that sort of target is the most difficult to spot because of its lack of motion. In that brief moment of realisation that the spot in the sky is not a speck on the windscreen but another aircraft on a collision course, there is often only that single moment in which to make a decision and take evasive action. Fortunately, control towers do not travel through space and, thus, the rate of closure is fully dependent on the airspeed of one object and not two. Unfortunately, a control tower cannot take evasive action. My attention was fully focused on the ever-

increasing target and not on Flynn, who had yanked open a desk drawer and was fumbling with more cartridges — bird or flare I had no idea.

One, two, three, four — four aircraft descending steeply out of the early morning, and they were closing rapidly in on the control tower.

I took a step closer to the window with my eyes fixed on the target. ‘Are we under attack?’

‘Battle stations!’ Flynn said as he slammed the cartridge home and headed out to the catwalk. Apparently controllers here, however, can take defensive action.

I do not consider myself a coward by any means. However, I am not an idiot either. Whatever those aircraft had in mind, the exposed tower cab was not the place to be. I decided it was more prudent to make my exit from Exile Tower with the utmost of haste, and leave these guys to fight their own fights. As the thunder of the aircraft engines grew louder, I left Nutcase number one to deal with them his own way — out on the catwalk with a flare gun — and I was halfway down the stairs when I ran into Nutcase number two.

* * *

‘What?’ I paused. I could see his eyebrow twitch. Somehow I got the feeling this guy sitting across the glass-topped desk didn’t believe me.

‘I didn’t say anything,’ he said and gave me a smug smile, which I took to mean that if he didn’t say something, then I was too stupid to pick up on the nuances of a raised eyebrow.

‘Well, what then? You told me to start at the beginning.’

‘Yes, I guess I did — but, well, what you’re talking about happened a long time ago — almost two years, if I’m not mistaken. We’re here to discuss the more recent events of the night of 17 February.’

‘Too early then?’

‘Maybe — but then again, maybe not. Maybe you could tell me more about your life before New Zealand. Before you left America. Why was the President angry with you?’

‘Forget it.’

‘Do you feel persecuted by people in power?’

'It wasn't the President personally, okay? I got in trouble with his plane, Air Force One and the people who had entrusted me with its safety. Forget it.'

'Okay,' he shrugged. 'So where were we? You were running away.'

'Yeah, I was running away. And it was a habit I was trying to break.'

Two

Freddie Moore stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the eighth floor, glad he was alone and glad there was a mirror — it gave him the opportunity to do a quick check on his appearance. The all-important first self-impression was good. He made a minor adjustment to the expensive silk tie he had grabbed off the rack in haste only ten minutes earlier. The tie was a good match to his dark blue suit and gave him a solidly conservative look. Despite being rushed, he still had enough taste to steal the right tie. He practised his ‘confident-but-not-too-cocky’ smile and checked his teeth for remnants of the Egg McMuffin. He didn’t really have to steal ties from menswear stores any more. He just liked keeping in practice — it was like a game, and he liked playing.

In his youth, Frederick Templeton Moore III hated his name as much as he hated his poverty. But he learned to tolerate the former when he discovered how it could be used to alleviate the latter. It was all about having the right attitude. At the time he was living outside Toronto at the Scarborough Home for Youthful Offenders — better known to the local citizens as ‘Scarberia’, and to the teenage inmates as the SHITs — an acronym that was supposed to stand for the Scarborough Home for Incurable Teens, but the management of the facility refused to cooperate on the renaming issue. He was still embarrassed that he had been sent to that bleak place for the most blue-collar of all teenage crimes — stealing cars. The very thought of sinking so low brought a momentary twinge and a flicker to his otherwise easy smile. But that was the end of his days as a lowly car thief. Leave the petty stuff to the deadbeats, the punks, the losers and the blue-collar schmucks, as his old man used to call them. Of course his old man was one of the biggest losers around, a petty criminal whose greatest talent was for getting caught. Indeed, the mere fact that he ‘emigrated’ to Canada from his native Detroit was the only time he ever really got away. What his old man was running from Freddie never knew. Their relationship was not exactly the kind you see in real estate adverts on the suburban ideal. Most of his conversations with his father were limited to visiting hours, and the only three pieces of wisdom he could remember his father passing on to him were: ‘The world’s full of chumps — don’t be another,’ and, ‘Listen up, kid — whatever you do, don’t ever get caught.’

That last one said with a glass partition between them.

The third, Freddie had to figure out for himself.

Alfie Moore was wise enough to advise Freddie never to get caught — it was just a shame he wasn't smart enough to know how to avoid getting caught himself. Fortunately, Freddie was smarter than his old man and, while Alfie fulfilled his station in life, Freddie decided on his. His station, his destiny, was among a much higher class of people.

While at Scarberia, he got an education and began a transformation that would take him from Fast Freddie the teenage car thief to his proper and full potential. He learned everything he could from every inmate there. He learned to talk fast and to talk smooth and he never once had to use his fists to prove himself. It was around that time that he first understood why a petty crook by the name of Alfie Moore could label a scrawny little kid with as outlandish a handle as 'Frederick Templeton Moore III'. But the old man had a bit of sense after all, if only a bit. He made up the 'Templeton' and tacked on the 'III' because he thought it made him sound classy. And, what Freddie finally came to understand to be the most valuable piece of unspoken wisdom from his old man, was to become Freddie's motto for life: 'It's not who you are that counts, but who they *think* you are.'

Freddie brushed his fingers lightly across his hair to tidy it up. Should have got a haircut, he thought. He was just glad he still had his hair past forty. He stepped back and took one last glance over his whole presentation before the doors opened. It was still good — he was tall, but not imposing, his dark hair was flecked with the right amount of grey to offset his boyish good looks, and his thickening middle made him look successful.

The elevator doors opened and revealed the reception desk with an attractive woman sitting behind it. Freddie liked beautiful women well enough, but what immediately caught his eye was the stainless steel corporate logo that adorned the wall behind her. 'ControlCorp' it said. Both the Cs dipped and swooped down under the other letters, suggesting a pair of jets tracing contrails in the sky, the polished silver letters on a field of blue. To Freddie Moore, that was beauty, and he had no doubt that it would soon be his logo, his company. When that day came, he would have the receptionist as his mistress, just because she looked so good under the corporate logo.

'Hello, sweetheart,' he said to her with a warm smile that would disarm any

offence she might take to his greeting, as it always did. 'I'm Frederick Templeton Moore.' He leaned in close to her. 'The third,' he added with a wink, as if it meant they had finally perfected Frederick Templeton Moores.

'Yes, Mr Moore,' she responded with her own smile that contained the faintest suggestion of an extracurricular interest and wonderment at what the first two Frederick Moores must have been like. 'We've been expecting you. Welcome to ControlCorp. I'll let them know you're here.' She picked up the phone.

Freddie stepped into the warm sunlight flooding through the tinted window and looked at the view from the eighth floor lobby. The sun shone on Wellington like a jewel waiting to be uplifted from its lonely place in the jeweller's case and wrapped warmly and lovingly in his fist. It would be his city, his company, his mistress. There was so much opportunity here he could taste it. This was a new beginning for him. He had finally found his place. To hell with practising law. This, the corporate world, was his destiny.

He didn't regret putting himself through law school. Most of it was just a lot of work doctoring the necessary records. Forgery had been one of the many 'unofficial' night classes he had excelled in back in Scarberia. He knew the law well enough to sail through with no problems and, although he wasn't too thrilled about being disbarred last year, he could see now that it was all for the better. At least he was able to deal himself out of doing time.

He smiled to himself, a cell door closes and a window opens. To hell with the law. All he had to do with ControlCorp was play his cards right, be patient, keep a high profile at the right time, a low profile at other times, and always know what time it was. It was going to be a breeze getting in good with these poor stupid, civil-service-trained chumps.

'Hello, Freddie.'

Freddie turned to the sound of the familiar voice.

Speak of the devil, hello chump. He smiled and reached out his hand, 'Why, hello, Carlton. It's so good to see you again.'

Carlton Woodcock was a short, mousy-faced guy with big glasses hanging on his mousy little nose and a disproportionately large, square forehead. He looked at Freddie's outstretched hand and reluctantly gave it a quick, limp shake.

Woodcock was several years younger than Freddie and his past was uninspiring. He went to school and studied hard — had a BSc in chemistry of all

things, then switched to business and worked even harder for an MBA. He had a disturbing mean streak in him — the kind that liked frying bugs with magnifying glasses on summer days — but lacked the spine, cunning and charm to be a really good confidence man.

He should have stuck with the chemistry, Freddie thought. Only chumps sat around and waited to get what they deserved, which invariably they did, and it was squat. You had to take what you deserved. Freddie was clever enough to do that, but someone like Woodcock was only smart enough to attach himself like a leech to more talented men. He was the good ol' reliable 'Number 2', the guy who did the dirty work, a professional sidekick.

Freddie had no doubt why Woodcock had brought him into ControlCorp, and why Woodcock had encouraged the Board to support and swallow whole Freddie's curriculum vitae. Woodcock knew what the score was: regardless of their job titles, there was a pecking order, a 'master-disciple' relationship to be honoured.

Woodcock was used to it; they had worked together before. When Freddie first arrived here in this new land of opportunity a few years earlier, Woodcock had been a steerer for him, directing pigeons toward Freddie's real estate investment venture. At least it had paid his way through business school. Of course, when it all turned to shit, Woodcock did a bloody good disappearing act. Freddie himself was struck off, but it was a small price to pay. They made some money, had a good time. To hell with the law.

'I'll show you to your new office,' Woodcock nodded down the hall, carpeted in thick, blue plush. 'They've given you a better office than mine.'

'Just a humble little cubicle will do,' Freddie said with smile.

'The Board was impressed, Freddie,' Woodcock said as they started to walk. 'You must be especially proud of that little piece of fiction you call a CV.'

'Fiction is only a more potent truth, Carlton. I'm sure the Board just recognised talent.'

'Yeah, I'll put your name in for the Montana Book Award. You really played up the overseas experience.'

'Hey, I've been to nearly all those places.'

'That, and an MBA since last year?'

'You want to see it?'

‘But don’t you think “Corporate Reformer” might have been pushing it a bit? And how the hell did you manage the article in *The Business Times*?’

‘I didn’t say it was from *The Business Times*? I think I said it *should have* been run there.’

‘I see — another fabrication to add to your portfolio,’ Woodcock huffed.

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Freddie put his hand on Woodcock’s shoulder and patted it gently. ‘Remember what I taught you, Carlton.’

Woodcock twitched at Freddie’s touch and shook him off. ‘Let’s see now: “Never admit to anything; leave someone else’s fingerprints — oh, and call your mum once a week.”’

‘No, no, Carlton — “Know your audience.”’

‘You mean, know that they are either too busy, too old or too close to being indicted themselves to worry about background checking?’

‘Oh, don’t make it sound so cynical, Carlton. I was only highlighting my strengths. You know, sarcasm doesn’t suit you. If I didn’t know better I could get the impression you were not completely thrilled to see me here.’

‘Well, I’m responsible for bringing you here aren’t I?’ Woodcock paused, looked up at Freddie, then let out a snort through his little mousy nose — a habit, Freddie was reminded, that was especially irritating and betrayed the kid’s vulgar origins. ‘I guess I’m just a little worried, Freddie. Yes, we need you here to do your thing, exploring the commercial opportunities side. But this is also the best break I’ve ever had. This is legit, and the best chance to make a mark in the business world. I want you to promise you won’t get carried away. This is a business with huge potential, and all legally exploitable.’

‘Which is why you brought me in as your Manager of Commercial Operations.’ Freddie gave Woodcock’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. ‘And don’t think I’ll forget you for opening the door for me.’

‘All I’m saying is don’t get —’

‘Carlton, please. You insult me. You brought me in because I’m the best man for the job. And, like you said, there’s so much potential. What do you think I’m going to do — steal pens from the stationery cupboard?’

‘If that’s all you do ...’ Woodcock paused, stared at Freddie for a moment, then let out another little snort in resignation.

‘That’s my boy.’ Freddie smiled.

‘Here’s your office.’

Freddie entered slowly, savouring the moment of crossing the threshold into his new office, his new world, and the lair from which to rule it — a corner office no less.

He suppressed a smile, simply nodding his approval instead. To one side there was a sofa, chairs and wet bar for entertaining important visitors and ‘relaxing’ with the secretary, to the other, the business end. He walked behind the desk and admired the view from his eighth floor office, again nodding his approval of the diamond-like sparkle Wellington had on a sunny day. He could see the waterfront which, unlike the smelly port back home, was an ocean port with the clean, sticky smell of salt air and water a person could swim in without having to worry about dead fish or toxic waste.

‘It’ll do,’ Freddie said, finally turning back to Woodcock.

‘Corner office,’ Woodcock grunted. ‘I wanted this office.’

‘Commercial opportunities, Carlton my boy. That’s why they put me here. My job will be to impress big shots from the outside. Besides,’ he sank into the smooth leather chair and had to resist the urge to let out a sigh of orgasmic satisfaction with its gentle caress, ‘you’re always welcome in here.’ He motioned Woodcock to the seat opposite. ‘This is where you and I will spend many long hours turning this two-bit operation into a formidable corporate power.’

Woodcock flopped into the chair. ‘Yeah, well, before you start restructuring your kingdom, keep in mind they’re waiting for us in the boardroom. They’ve laid out a little spread for morning tea in there.’

‘Good, I’m starving.’ Freddie clasped his fingers behind his head, leaned back and gazed into the soft, fluorescent lighting. ‘Just a couple things I thought we could go over before we meet everyone else.’

‘Yeah?’ Woodcock glanced at his watch.

‘Well, just one thing really. You know, it’s all been such a whirlwind: the headhunting, preparing the CV, the interviewing, flying here, flying there, meeting the Board. There are a few things I haven’t had a chance to get caught up on.’ He glanced at Woodcock. ‘You know, just some background business info.’

‘Well, they’ll catch you up on the details over the next few days,’ Woodcock shrugged.

‘Yeah, the details.’ Freddie leaned forward and bent across his desk, lowering his voice. ‘But generally speaking ... what is it ControlCorp actually does?’

When Woodcock squinted, it made him look like a near-sighted mouse and was just as unbecoming as his little snort. ‘You’re kidding?’

‘I mean, just out of general interest,’ Freddie shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Ultimately, business is business — it doesn’t matter what they actually do. They hired me for my business expertise. I don’t care if we make airplanes or garbage can lids.’

‘We don’t make anything. We’re the sole provider of air traffic control to the entire country and a sizeable chunk of the Pacific — a service that was previously provided by a government department.’

‘Oh, a service industry! That’s even better — no suppliers to deal with. And the traffic controller is the guy with the orange torches?’ He motioned his hands in a backward wave of his fists.

‘No, not the guys on the tarmac. These are the guys on the radio, in the tower, behind the radar screens — you know, air traffic controllers. They’re professionals, they’re well paid, they’re arrogant and they’re unionised.’

‘All minor points to be dealt with, one at a time. Okay, I’m ready.’ Freddie slapped his leather armrests. ‘Let’s get to that little reception, Carlton.’ He stood up and paused as he took a deep breath and put his hand on his heart. ‘Yes, Sir, aviation’s been a secret passion of mine since my childhood. Oh, no, I don’t regret having to give up those dreams of pursuing a career as an air controller for one moment when my father was killed. My mother and my little sister needed me to be working.’

‘Christ,’ Woodcock snorted as he pushed himself upright and followed Freddie out the door, ‘I think my ulcer is flaring up again.’

Three

The roar of the engines of four T6s and a DC3 cranking up so early in the morning might have bothered a neighbour or two, but it was not an unusual sound coming from this airport. In a semi-rural area like this, the noise seldom drew any complaints from those who had already been hard at work since daybreak. It was only unusual in the fact that it was occurring on a Monday morning instead of a Saturday or Sunday, when all those old Warbirds got together for a play for old times' sake. And the noise was earlier than normal, as the Warbirds usually gathered later in the afternoon, so they could finish up in time to head straight for *The Tie Down* to relive that flight and a thousand others.

They had lifted off at 0750 that morning — ten minutes prior to the tower opening, so they were reasonably certain there would be nobody in the tower cab to notice their departure. Even if the controller was in the tower, he or she was probably downstairs in the equipment room setting up the tape machine that would record the frequencies and all that would be said that day. The great roar of the formation flight departure would have been out of the ordinary, but not so much as to cause concern.

The four T6s took off in a staggered formation first, and as they stirred up the thin patches of ground fog and rose into the crisp, clean blue sky of the new day, the DC3 with its special cargo on board took up the rear. They climbed out steep and high and were soon too distant to be seen or heard as the ground fog settled back into stillness.

They called themselves the Wild Blue Squadron and had a long roster of ageing pilots who would sign up for the weekend formation training. Only the best of them would actually get to perform at air shows, but they all got a chance at the practice flights and the formation training every Saturday or Sunday afternoon, weather permitting.

Today was not a practice run, however. Today they were going into a battle that had been planned to the last detail. It involved an early morning departure, then forming up over the harbour and doing a little precision work until the allotted time arrived: 0845 hours. It was the exact time at which, after cutting a wide circle around to the east, they would approach the airport from directly out of the rising sun. A surprise attack.

Blue Leader circled far to the east to position the squadron between the target and the sun so the unsuspecting enemy would not see them until it was too late. Their mission: neutralise the enemy airfield at Milton Gorge, and take out the enemy control tower, with minimum casualties. Many of their friends were being held captive on the ground — held captive by landing fees, fuel taxes and now, new charges for air traffic services being provided by an enemy that had taken over the airfield in a brutal and unwarranted assault on their peaceful home.

The Squadron Leader pressed the little red button on his stick with his thumb. ‘Okay men, tighten up,’ he said to the other three aircraft that were inching their way into position. ‘Blue two, bring it in closer.’

‘Roger, Blue Leader.’

‘Blue Leader to Dakota Blue. Are you in position?’ the Squadron Leader asked the fifth member of the strike force, the DC3 flying somewhat lower and closer in. If all went as planned, the second the four T6s of Blue Squadron crossed the control tower on their strafing run at eight hundred feet, the DC3 would be arriving from east-northeast, and crossing their flight paths just behind at one thousand five hundred to deposit its payload. The T6s would break left, over the DC3, which would then position itself number five and depart the area until a damage assessment could be made.

Their objective was simple: strike hard, strike fast and be gone before the enemy had a chance to know what hit them. It was routine. Most of them had been doing this for many years, although these days it was more difficult to tell the enemy apart. Friend looked like foe. Except for the uniform, the enemy dressed in blue suits. But that was enough to the old men of the Wild Blue Squadron. Their eyes may not have been as sharp, their senses not as keen, but their trigger fingers were just as quick.

They pulled into formation and from then on moved as one aircraft. Only Blue Leader had the target airfield in sight. Each man to his right kept his eyes glued to the wing of the man to his left. The fourth plane in line was Blue 4, Amos Scuffield. There was something he had not told his comrades in the briefing room that morning — this was to be his last flight. Even this flight was illegal. The doctor had pulled his medical the day before; he was grounded permanently. Amos Scuffield had been diagnosed with cancer of the liver. After this flight, he would no longer fly with the

men of Wild Blue Squadron. His flying days were forever over.

He had been flying since he hit puberty sixty years ago. He didn't know how *not* to fly. It was in his blood; it permeated his very soul. When he rested on the front porch of his house in the afternoon, he never watched the passers-by on the road; his eyes and thoughts were on the sky. That's where he lived and without it he would die for sure. That's why he decided not to mention it to the boys in Wild Blue Squadron. He didn't want their pitying eyes glancing at him sideways, and he didn't want to hear about the passing of an era and the fact that he was the last pilot in the squadron who had been in the war — the big one — and got in on the tail end of the action in the Pacific theatre. He could still keep his plane tucked in close behind Blue 3; his hand was still as steady. By right of seniority, he could have been Blue Leader. But he opted for the fourth position, as it suited his plan better. He was not ready to give up what meant everything to him, and he was damned sure not going to spend the next year or so rotting away on the ground, in a hospital ward smelling of antiseptic and remembering what used to be. Wild Blue Squadron's plan was simple. His was more so.

'All right, men,' Blue Leader announced. 'We're going in.' He nudged the nose of his aircraft over, keeping his target centred right above the nose.

Wild Blue Squadron approached the field boundary at eight hundred feet. They levelled off for their fly-by. That went exactly according to plan, but then Blue 4 commenced his own 'Plan B.' He keyed his mike and transmitted a message. 'Blue four dropping out. I'm going in alone.' And without waiting for a reply, he pushed his nose down and dipped out of the formation. There was a jumble of confused transmissions. Blue Leader thought at first Blue 4 had had engine failure and was making an emergency landing, but in a millisecond it sank in — Blue 4 was Amos Scuffield. He had long been concerned about Amos's mental capacity. It was time for the man to retire, but he had not had the heart to do it. Flying was everything to Amos.

'Blue Four! No!' Blue Leader yelled into his mike, but there was so little time. He did not know in the split second that remained what could be said to make Amos Scuffield divert from whatever he was intending to do. He pulled back on his stick and brought the remainder of his squadron up to two thousand feet, and held his breath.

Amos had only one objective — he was going to destroy the control tower by

flying right through it. Maybe it was not the most efficient way to remove the building, but it would certainly make his point. Sure, there would be fatalities — his was already sealed in a lab report at his doctor's office. And the others that were doomed to die that day worked for the same government that was taking his wings away. All these old windbags at Wild Blue Squadron thought they would make a difference by pulling off this silly little stunt, an unapproved fly-by, a buzz and break, the DC3 dumping a couple of hundred pounds of flour on the tower — all in protest against the privatisation of their airfield and the proposed new charges that were to be levelled at the flying public.

Silly old men, Amos had thought, pretending to be fighter pilots. No one would take notice of their flaccid complaint. It was like spitting on the beach to protest the ocean. If they wanted to make a difference they needed to leave a gaping, bleeding, open wound, a scar that would last. And who better for the job? He had reasons to be rid of that building, reasons that went back to a time when most of these old blowhards were waiting for their testicles to drop. He dropped his plane down almost to the deck and pulled it level with the tower cab. They were a bunch of old men full of hot air. Only he was willing to take the action that would get someone to take notice. His hands tightened on the stick; he did not breathe; his eyes were locked on the target.

Amos Scuffield was the last remaining active pilot who had been with the squadron in Bougainville. Of the rest of the active roster, most of them spent their weekdays sitting in the cockpits of 747s pushing the autopilot button and the flight attendant call button for coffee refills. None of them had known what he had known tangling with the Japs in the skies over New Guinea. On the ground, it was like living in hell, with the heat, the malaria and the misery. The only place to escape it was the air, where the Japs fought with a fierceness he had never expected. They were relentless, never letting up. And, for all that misery, they were the best days of his life. He was where he was supposed to be for the only time in his life. He was an airborne warrior tasting the total freedom of flight, the pure adrenaline of the fight, the camaraderie. The best friend he ever had in his life, the only friend, was a wild young man named Arthur Capstone. Together, Cappy and he ruled the skies; no one dared challenge their authority. They were young and insanely brave. They were invincible — or so they thought. Then, in an instant, Cappy disintegrated in a ball of flame off Amos's wing one day, hit by enemy fire. None of these button-pushing old farts had

seen their best friends disappear in fire off their wing.

His eyes were totally focused on the target. He did not blink. Estimated time of impact, about two seconds. 'It's taps for you ol' Rumbold,' he whispered.

On the catwalk that ran along the outside of the tower cab, he could see someone standing there defiantly, holding ... what was that he had in his hand? A gun? A flare pistol? Good Lord, what was the man thinking? That he could put a nasty scorch in the plane as it obliterated the building? Was he so foolish as to think that thing would do anything but bounce off his plane at this speed? Was he such a fool? Or was he insanely brave enough to know he had no time left and no other choice but to stand and fight with whatever he had?

Then there was that moment. He locked eyes with the madman on the catwalk with the flare pistol. He knew that boy. It was Flynn. He didn't like him much; he was rude, wild, unpredictable and foolishly unflappable enough to try to stare down a T6 at full throttle. He was Cappy. He wasn't Amos's enemy, merely a foot soldier caught on the wrong side. If only it had been Rumbold out there, it would be easy. But that traitorous pencil-pusher probably wasn't even in the building at this hour of the morning.

Amos jerked his hand back and flicked the nose just high enough to clear the roof of the tower, his wingtip clipping the limp chequered flag off, then banked hard to the left as he flew into the cloud of flour being dropped from the DC3 only a couple hundred feet above him. With another flick of his wrist, he banked it hard right to avoid the other T6s reforming to the south of the airfield for their landing and flew off into the morning sky, destination unknown. He needed some time to think about things, to reflect on life, death, war and courage and the willingness to die for causes.

No one in Wild Blue Squadron tried to persuade Amos to come back in as he flew off into the morning light, barely clearing the tops of the green hills and then disappearing beyond.

'Chicken shit! Chicken shit! Come back and try that again!' was all the flight instructors and students could make out as they ran out on to the lawn as the booming noise of the high-speed fly-by receded. 'Scuffield, you chicken shit! Come back and try me again,' was what they all agreed they thought they heard, but the sound was slightly muffled by the swirling cloud of what at first looked to be smoke, but, judging by the rate it was settling, could only have been flour. The shadowy figure of

Flynn continued yelling 'chicken shit' and waving his flare pistol long after Amos Scuffield's plane had disappeared from sight.

Fearing that Flynn's gun might still be loaded, and considering the remaining cloud of flour dust that was slowly drifting in their direction, the group decided to retreat to the safety of the indoors. Brandon stayed behind, with his hands pushed deep into his pockets he began to laugh. 'Burn, baby, burn.'

Four

'Amanda and I were literally thrown into each other's arms from the very beginning.'

'How's that?'

'It was like an earthquake. She was just starting up the stairs from the second floor with an armful of books, and I was coming down. This plane came so close to hitting the tower it shook the whole building like an earthquake. She dropped her books and I tripped over the last step and ended up in her arms. It was like the earth had thrust us together.'

'You liked her?'

'Yeah, for the first week. But she had that dangerous quality of appearing utterly normal on first meeting, yet being completely insane. A first impression would only tell you that she was an astonishingly attractive, intelligent, confident woman.' I glanced across at the guy. He seemed only mildly interested, with his heavily lidded eyes and emotionless expression. He looked like he could doze off at any minute. 'It was all part of her deception, you see; she was attractive in the same way a black widow spider must look to her doomed mate. She was a dominatrix in civilian clothes.'

'You were attracted to her?'

'At first, maybe. Sure, why not? She had all the right parts in the right places. And there was something magnetic about her. Seductive. In any case, I seem to go for strong women. Janey, my ex-wife, was like that.'

His eyebrow twitched again. 'So, you were married in the States?'

'Yeah.'

'And now?'

'Divorced.'

He nodded thoughtfully, then asked, 'And how would you have described your marriage?'

'It was like a fairy tale,' I said.

'Good?'

'Grimm.'

* * *

'I'm Amanda Sheppard,' she said, still in my arms and looking straight into my eyes. She had long, blonde hair, clear, blue eyes and graceful, if not slightly sharp, features.

'Tom Hardy,' I said, then suddenly realising we were still embracing I decided to do the gentlemanly thing and release her instead of doing the instinctive thing and kissing her beautiful mouth.

'Oh yes, you're our cowboy.'

'I'm a controller.'

'So I heard.' She offered her hand, which was warm, soft, and, though gentle, quite firm. 'It's good to meet you at long last. We've heard so much about you.' Then she bent down and started gathering up her books and I followed her down into a squatting position to lend a hand.

'*Business Administration?*' I asked, looking at the title I picked up.

'Yes, I'm doing a business degree at university. I have no intention of being left behind.' She started up the stairs and I could not help but notice her beautifully sculpted and expertly manoeuvred legs. I was thoroughly impressed. Amanda Sheppard knew the power of presentation.

'Left behind by what?' I asked, my eyes fixated on her own behind so gently shifting back and forth under her skirt like the ebb and flow of a gentle surf as she led me by the eyeballs back up the stairs into the tower cab.

Flynn was just coming in from the catwalk, a walking cloud of flour mumbling something about chicken shit without taking the least notice of Amanda. He stopped and looked at me. 'Oh good, you're back. Did you bring the cavalry?'

'Don't take any notice of him,' Amanda said, her words taking on a sudden harshness, 'and whatever first impression he gave you, ignore it. He's hardly our best ambassador.'

I decided not to tell her about my first impression of Flynn.

'Ambassador?' Flynn grunted, then glanced up at me and grinned, his teeth appearing yellow in his flour-covered faced. 'Amanda, on the other hand, will be glad to do what she can to change your impressions.'

Amanda ignored Flynn. 'Well, first we'll start with a cup of tea.'

'No thanks, I'm not a tea drinker.'

'No, don't worry.' She shook her head in disgust at the mess Flynn had made

around the sink. 'It's no trouble.'

'I'll have mine black, thanks,' Flynn said.

'Make it yourself,' she said to him with a coolness that brought the temperature down a full two degrees. 'So how was your flight?' She asked me with a warm smile. She took her time to clean out the teapot carefully and scrub two cups clean as the electric jug began to boil.

'Long,' I said. I was about to tell her about the talkative 280-pound Australian rugby fan who sat next to me for eleven and a half hours, but then figured she probably was not interested.

She was making the tea in a pot, rather in cups, and preheating the now clean cups.

'And how do you find New Zealand?'

'It's fine, I guess. I only arrived this morning. Haven't seen much ...' I let my sentence trail off, assuming she wasn't really listening. Flynn, seemingly unconcerned that he was still covered head-to-toe in flour, which made him look like a living, talking Michelangelo reject, had sat down and opened the drawer in which he had grabbed the signal pistol cartridges. I was somehow relieved when he opened the signal pistol up and let the unspent cartridge drop out into the drawer; somehow relieved that he hadn't fired it at the aircraft; somehow relieved that he was, just maybe, not so much dangerous as simply insane.

As Amanda was carefully doling out milk in each cup with a certain exactitude, Flynn propped his heavy work boots up on the work desk and became deeply engrossed in cleaning the signal pistol.

'So,' she said, 'Welcome to Milton Gorge.' She pronounced it as if it was a joke name. 'And to the end of an era.'

'The end of what era?'

'The end of the old days,' Amanda said smiling, her eyes were alive with the optimism of someone whose favourite political candidate had just been elected. She handed me the cup of tea. 'The end of an outdated, outmoded bureaucracy. The end of the prodigal system.'

'Oh,' was all I could think to say as I looked past Amanda at Flynn, who rolled his eyes, suggesting Amanda was a loonier tune than he was. 'The prodigal system, you say? Is there something I'm missing?'

'Not at all,' Amanda said, almost laughing. 'You're just in time for it. And

don't worry, I know there will be room in the new system for you.' She briefly tilted her head venomously in Flynn's direction.

'That would be the New World Order. Could you elaborate on that for me?' I said, even though I wasn't sure I wanted to know any more.

'I don't have time myself,' she said as she tucked her books under one arm and held her cup of tea in the other hand. 'I have to get some studying done.'

'Gee,' Flynn piped in loudly, 'and here I thought you might have come here to do some controlling.'

'Oh yes, of course. It is busy, isn't it?' She said, calmly sarcastic. 'But, a great controller like you shouldn't be too overworked by, let me see, zero airplanes? So just call me if you need me, Owen.' She nearly spat his name.

'I told you not to call me that!' Flynn's upper lip twitched.

'See you later, Cowboy,' Amanda said, returning her attention to me with a seductive smile. I was impressed at how easily, and how completely, she could toggle between charm and spite. 'Thornie should be in any time now,' she said as she disappeared down the stairs. 'I'll catch up with you later.'

'Thornie?'

'Believe me,' Flynn said, his attention still fully focused on the pistol. 'You don't want to know until you absolutely have to.'

I slumped down in the chair next to him and looked into my cup of tea. 'Is everybody around here ...?' But didn't know how to finish.

'Some of them are worse,' Flynn said. 'Wait till you meet the guy with the rat. Now, if you don't mind.' Flynn stood up and started for the stairs. 'Since Princess isn't going to give me a break, I have some important business to attend to. Watch that for me, will ya?'

'Watch what?'

'Well, what do you think?' Flynn asked. 'You can either watch me take a dump, or you can watch that.' He waved his hand at the chair where he had been sitting — the tower controller's position. 'You *are* a controller aren't you?'

'Well, yes, but ...' I didn't know where to begin. Even an experienced controller needed training at a new airport. Besides, I hadn't done it for months, and never in this country.

'But, what?' Flynn shrugged. 'Thornie said you were the best cowboy in

town.'

'Who's Thornie?'

But Flynn had already disappeared down the stairs. I looked around the tower cab.

Was this just a weird dream I was having, I wondered, brought on by some indigestible additive in the in-flight meal? Still, it was quiet here. And that's what I was looking for. I did a quick scan of the airfield. The ground fog had pretty much disappeared. There were traces of movement here and there. I saw a car pull into the parking lot of a building on the far side of the runway, but still there was only silence blanketing the whole scene.

'Milton Gorge Tower,' the radio at the tower controller's position crackled with a suddenness that made me jump and splash hot tea across the back of my hand. 'Echo delta mike is ready to taxi for the circuit at the flying school.'

I stared at the radio. This was not a dream.

'Tower?' the radio crackled again. 'You there, tower? Hellooo tower, come in,' the pilot said impatiently.

'*An' let poor damned bodies be,*' I whispered, reaching for the microphone. My hand, red from the tea burn, was shaking as I keyed the switch. 'Ah, calling the tower, say again?'

'Echo delta mike,' the pilot started again slowly. 'At the school, taxi for circuits.'

'Echo delta mike,' I responded with as much authority as I could muster without knowing what the hell I was talking about. 'Taxi approved.'

'Thank you, tower.' The pilot sounded suspicious: 'Which runway you using?'

Yes, of course. Which runway, indeed. If only I knew what runway numbers they used at this airport. But a good controller has to be able to think on his feet, even if he doesn't know where he is, or why he is there — and the only thing I knew about where I was, was that it was on thin ice, so I may as well dance.

I put the mike up to my mouth and glanced at the anemometer on the control panel. 'Echo delta mike, the wind is three five zero degrees at five knots. Runway's your choice.'

'Roger that. We'll take three-zero.'

Great. Three-zero. That meant the other end was one-two. Just avoid using the crossing runway, and we should not have to suffer any public embarrassment.

When I spotted the Cessna 172 taxiing from the area Flynn had recently fired upon, I was already well on my way to figuring this place out and feeling the old confidence returning, so I decided to push it. 'Echo delta mike, advise your direction of flight.'

'We're remaining in the circuit.'

The what?

'Roger,' I said to the plane, 'And what will you be doing there?'

'Touch and goes, what else?' the pilot spoke hesitantly as if he were talking to an idiot.

Okay, making a mental note: they call it the 'circuit'. In America we call it the 'pattern', the traffic pattern. 'Roger,' I said authoritatively. 'That's approved.'

'You're new here, aren't you?' the pilot asked.

'Does it show?'

'Only a little.'

'Just started today.'

'Today?' There was a momentary silence, then, for the second time already that day I was asked, 'Are you one of them?'

I keyed the mike and applied the same philosophy I had with Flynn. 'No, I'm one of us.'

Perhaps I was in the wrong place. It crossed my mind again that maybe this sad place was just an unused airfield, fenced in, and where the authorities let the lunatics roam free. But at the moment I was considering the possibility that maybe this dilapidated relic of an airport could be just what I needed — a quiet place where nothing happened, where nothing ever went wrong, and Air Force One was never ever going to come. Besides, air traffic control is like riding a bike and a few months away from it was hardly going to make me rusty. By the time that plane made two trips around the traffic pattern — the circuit — I was already feeling fairly comfortable at the old job, at least, with one airplane at a time.

'Milton Gorge Tower,' a new voice showed up on the radio. 'Wild Blue Squadron minus one over Mokarangi, inbound for landing.'

'Mocha-what?' I said aloud to myself.

'Southwest, seven miles,' came the answer from behind. It was Flynn standing at the top of the stairs.

'Good, you're back.' I stood up.

‘What are you doing?’ Flynn asked as he went to pour himself a cup of tea from the pot Amanda had prepared. He drank his straight black. ‘You’re doing fine. Just give them left base joining, tell him they’ll be following the guy on downwind, the T6s will land first, then the Dakota, and every thing will fall right into place. Then tell them they can all come over and wash the flour off all our cars.’

I issued the instructions to the lead pilot of the flight of four aircraft, picked up the binoculars and scanned the horizon for the incoming traffic. Here I was talking to airplanes, working again, only hours after setting foot in this country. This was nuts.

Flynn settled down in the seat next to me with his cup of tea. ‘Thornie’s here. You might as well go down and get it over with.’

‘Go down where? Get what over with? And who is Thornie?’