

NO WOLVES IN LOS ANGELES

By M S Lawson

ISBN 978-0-6455245-1-2 (e-book)

Copyright© 2023 by Mark Steven Lawson writing as M S Lawson
markslawson@optusnet.com.au

Published by Clearvadersname Pty Ltd

Website: www.clearvadersname.com

All rights reserved. The book contains material protected under international and national copyright laws and treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without express permission from the publisher.

Other books by this author

Dark Ages – The looming destruction of the Australian power grid
(non-fiction, Connor Court, 2023)

Obsidian's War – the winter city (ebook, 2022)

Obsidian's War (ebook, 2021)

The Musketeers of Haven – a science fiction story (ebook, 2020)

Claire Takes on The Galaxy (ebook, published on the web site Dreame, 2019)

Darth Vader – The good guy who lost (non-fiction ebook, 2018)

A Planet for Emily (ebook, 2017)

Disgraced in all of Koala Bay (ebook, 2016)

The Zen of Being Grumpy (non-fiction published by Connor Court, 2013)

Cover image: shutterstock

This book is dedicated to my:

Father, Robert Lawson, a Jane Austenophile or Janite.

Sister Joanne who, when told that I was writing a romance asked if I had ever read one.

Daughter Michelle, another Janite, who as a child was worried that there might be Wolves outside the family home when I read her Little Red Riding Hood.

CHAPTER ONE

When Meghan Kowalski's father read Little Red Riding Hood to his daughter he was amused by the illustration of the big bad wolf in the bedtime storybook the family used. This showed a suave, smiling wolf dressed in a suit hailing Little Red Riding Hood on the way to her grandmother's place.

"You might meet lots of wolves when you are older," said Kowalska senior, as he thought that his Meghan might have inherited much from his mother who had been a beauty queen in her day.

"You mean there are wolves around here?" exclaimed little Meghan.

"No, no wolves now," said her father. "I meant that you might meet them later, when you are older."

"There are wolves, then," said Meghan, looking at the bedroom window in alarm, thinking that there might be wolves right outside.

"No, no, no wolves around here," said Mr Kowalski, sorry he had made this adult comment. "There are no wolves in Los Angeles." That was where the family happened to live. "None at all."

This calmed little Meghan enough to listen to the rest of the story – a sanitised version with the grandmother locked in the closet rather than eaten – although she still found the wolf scary. As she grew up, however, she lost her fear of wolves in dark forests, especially as there were no forests near her up-scale LA suburb. Instead, she became absorbed in school and her friends including Connie Leighton, who also showed promise of being able to catch men's eyes when she got older.

There were sleepovers and shared confidences which developed into confessions of secret crushes and talk about fending off unwanted attention from boys. Then Meghan took drama and was told that she could act. She also took singing lessons and thought she could sing. Connie took singing lessons and was told that she could sing. She also took drama classes and thought she could act. The two girls competed for the lead role of Blanche DuBois in the school's production of Tennessee William's classic *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Meghan won and turned the play into a triumph, much to Connie's dismay. They competed in a local singing contest which Connie won hands down, wowing the crowd, with Meghan coming a distant fourth, mainly on her looks, much to her dismay.

Now each other's nemesis the two girls competed for Prom Queen which, to Meghan's fury, Connie won handily on a school-wide popular vote despite Meghan campaigning hard and having developed into a stunning blonde who was already getting regular modelling work. She had been discovered by a modeling agent at sixteen while at a street fair with her mother. The now not little Megan took the defeat so personally that she even told the principal that the election must have been fixed. This accusation enraged the Leighton family and embarrassed her father, who had to work hard to smooth over wounded feelings. He wondered what had happened to the girl who had to be reassured over wolves.

Both girls easily got into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts joining Connie's older brother Ty, also a singer. Meghan dated Ty for a time, infuriating Connie who was still sore about the vote rigging allegation, then dumped him, which infuriated her even more. She accused Meghan of deliberately breaking her brother's heart. Meghan moved on to a good looking senior with acting talent she met during a staging of Macbeth, only for the boy to drop her in favour of dating Connie, whom he met during the musical theatre programme. Meghan accused Connie of deliberately stealing her boyfriend. Meanwhile, just as Mr Kowalski had warned many years before, both girls discovered that there were plenty of male wolves.

Soon after, Connie dropped out of college and all contact with Meghan in favour of fronting a band performing mainly covers in high schools, hotels and bars, anywhere there was an audience and a dance floor. That band eventually dissolved but Connie and the drummer found two guitarists with some original material. She had an affair and a hit single with one of the guitarists before the affair, fame and drugs tore the group apart, but not before an agent scouted her for a band to showcase material from a rising songwriter. For Connie could sing, and that counted for something in the music business. The first hit was helped by a video so salacious it had to be re-edited to meet the requirements of the censors and prompted a concerned call from Connie's mother.

"It's the music business Ma," said Connie.

The video helped push that first single up the charts which was followed by another, solid hit by the rising star who found she had a knack for spotting potential chart toppers. Suddenly Connie Leighton was in the big time.

Meanwhile, the bank that Mr Kowalski had worked for as a senior executive hit major trouble and the stress of picking up the pieces, plus a lung infection, brought on a latent heart condition. His wife and two daughters, Meghan and the somewhat younger Madison, then discovered that Mr Kowalski had put the family's fortune, plus money borrowed against the family home, into the collapsed bank. On top of this, a long-standing family friend and financial advisor also caught in the bank disaster responded to the crisis by stealing his client's money, including Meghan's accumulated modelling fees, and vanishing. Meghan's father should have also warned his daughter, and himself, about wolves in the financial world.

The Kowalskis were abruptly reduced to a miserable two-bedroom apartment and to having to borrow from family to pay for a modest funeral. Meghan's degree was abandoned in favour of full-time modeling work, and her mother was forced to take a sales assistant job in an antique furniture store. A keen golfer, Mrs Kowalski also had to give up her expensive golf club membership, declining a well-meant but humiliating offer from friends to pay her dues until she was on her feet.

Fortunately, Meghan was a modeling natural knowing instinctively how to work with the camera. She put off moving to the fashion industry capital of New York to see her mother and sister through the tough time, but remaining in the movie heartland proved an advantage in that she was handed a one-off role in a sitcom, for which she reluctantly took the name Clarise Chalmers.

"It's branding," said the agent she had at the time. "No one pays to see shows with a Meghan Kowalski in it, but they will pay to see a Clarise Chalmers."

As acting and screen presence still counted for a lot in Hollywood, not to mention Meghan-turned-Clarise's considerable beauty, the one-off appearance turned into a recurring role with one episode featuring a shower scene so salacious that her mother expressed concern.

"It's Hollywood, mother," said Clarise-Meghan.

She auditioned for the lead in a major treasure-hunting adventure film not expecting to get it and ended up with the unlikely minor part of a blonde barbarian queen which attracted critical attention. After that came a role as the other woman in a straight-to-streaming-services rom-com movie so syrupy that Clarise had trouble watching it. She acted well enough in another cheap film for the audience to suspend disbelief that a luminously beautiful young woman was somehow a dowdy, lonely New York café waitress.

Her mother and sister now out of poverty, Meghan finally moved to New York to do a season on Broadway plus modeling, sharing a cheap apartment with another actress who drove her crazy, then moved back to Los Angeles when she got her big break playing an international model turned evil mastermind. She trained for weeks with a female fencing grandmaster for a sequence where she duelled with the hero while in her underwear. A role as the girlfriend of a superhero led to a major part in a heist movie. Clarise had decided to show flesh on screen, within reason, and a steamy shower scene that raised questions about the film's classification – which she did despite detesting her co-star - helped make it a box office smash hit.

Abruptly Meghan found that she had bypassed the long-slow grid of auditions to become a star. Offers of all kinds – financial, promotional, romantic, sexual and for media interviews – poured in. She fell out with her first, down-at-heel agent over accepting the lead in a remake of the Audrey Hepburn – Peter O'Toole 60s classic *How to Steal a Million*. The agent thought that the fledgling star should make another film that allowed her to show more flesh and offered more money, meaning a larger fee for him. Meghan proved to be the better judge of projects when the remake became a hit, and the other film bombed.

The rising star signed with a big management company that promised her the world, only for these promises to mean the company took bigger fees, in return for sending her endless scripts featuring empty-headed blondes that never got out of the shower. Meghan accepted that being blonde was part of the Clarise brand, but she wanted roles with more class than simulated sex in showers. She told this to the big agency executives who agreed, nodded vigorously and smiled then sent her more scripts with shower scenes, along with more modelling and endorsement work than she could possibly do.

A major distraction from these career and management issues, however, were very handsome leading men and drugs and partying. Meghan-Clarise never had any trouble attracting men but now they flocked around in packs howling. Hot, rich, successful, single men – at least they said they were single – drove her in expensive sports cars to parties in chateaus, super yachts, converted castles and plush apartments while talking of huge business deals and major movie roles. She discovered a previously unsuspected wild streak, which a rich, handsome man – preferably a Latin type – could bring out.

Meghan went swimming in the Seine in Paris with the cast of one film on a dare only to be fished out and fined by bemused French police.

“The river is being cleaned up, Mademoiselle Chalmers,” explained a senior Parisian police officer in perfect English, “but there is still too much pollution to permit public swimming.”

The Italian police were less tolerant of a similar incident involving the Trevi Fountain in Rome, where Meghan happened to be on a modelling assignment, as they found small amounts of drugs on some of the party. Fortunately, they did not find drugs on Meghan, but only because she was already high.

“You may be a rival in beauty for Anita Ekberg, Signoria Chalmers,” a senior Italian police officer told her in perfect English, referring to the classic scene in the 1960 film *La Dolce Vita* featuring that star cavorting in the fountain. “But too many tourists have been in the fountain since then. We will have to increase the fine.”

When Meghan's invaluable assistant and best friend Mia fetched her boss from the Roman lockup, she found the star signing autographs and posing for photos with policemen.

Then there was the party in Meghan-Clarise's fashionable serviced apartment in London where she was shooting the remake of *How to Steal a Million*. She invited a few friends but they, in turn, invited the wrong people, including top-end drug dealers, representatives of London's underworld who wanted to meet Clarise-Meghan and members of two rock bands that happened to be deadly rivals. Mayhem! Two celebrities had a fist fight in the apartment's spa pool, several groupies went topless while another high as a kite invitee emptied the magazine of a small pistol from a balcony into the nearby Thames, at which point the police were called. Meghan hid behind a couch with one of the groupies for the ensuing melee which involved five patrol cars, a police helicopter and the dog squad. One woman constable was slightly injured, a police dog bit a guest and ambulances had to be called for both the brawling celebrities.

"A father of one of our constables says there's been nothing like it since the Stones' tours, Ms Chalmers," said a senior English police officer in a broad Midlands accent to a badly hung over Meghan-Clarise still in her club dress the next day, "and we don't want to see it again. Given what happened in Paris and Rome, I might also point out that this far downstream you need prior written permission to go swimming in the Thames."

The incident prompted her mother to suggest rehab.

"I'm having fun, mother," Meghan said.

But it was the party in New York that turned Meghan from a Diva into a Hollywood bad girl. As she told her mother later it wasn't her fault that the enormous party in an apartment overlooking Central Park got completely out of control. She hadn't organised it and only met the owner of the apartment on the night. All she had done was turn up with her billionaire boyfriend of the time. She did not know until interviewed by detectives the next day that two rival sets of gangsters also attended, all of them under the impression that they would have carnal relations with her although she had never met with any of them. Nor did she witness the brawl around the apartment building's fountain which had to be broken up by police from several squad cars, and subsequent chase through Central Park involving mounted police officers. But because she was the highest profile celebrity at the party her name was mentioned prominently in all the news reports and the public, quite unfairly, came to believe that somehow she was behind the fracas.

Initially horrified by this turn of affairs Meghan found that her new reputation as a party animal (which had some justification) and Hollywood bad girl (which was unfair) meant a huge increase in the fees she could charge. This was helped by the fact that Meghan also had a sense of style that prompted comparisons with the late, great Audrey Hepburn. A bad girl with a sense of style is a winner on magazine covers. She bought a large house in on the edge of Beverley Hills with a pool to match as a home and headquarters and gave money to her mother to buy a partnership in a fashionable antique furniture store.

All that extra money, however, also meant that consultants offering services of all kinds clustered around her howling for fees. She had PR consultants, styling consultants, tax lawyers, corporate lawyers, physical trainers and a very expensive group that managed all forms of social media for her. Meghan's online profile needed managing, she was told, at a substantial cost. Then there were the website issues, security precautions and legal issues of one kind or another, some of them caused by the high priced consultants themselves who then wanted more fees to resolve them. Other sets of consultants handled whatever money was left over after the fees had been paid.

She invested money with one group, on the recommendation of a family friend. This collective of smooth-talking salesmen, as Meghan thought of them later, put all her money into a high-leverage, high-risk financial product which also happened to pay very high

commissions to the salesmen. The product promptly failed miserably with the promoters getting to the airport only a step or two ahead of several Federal agencies. The salesmen got their commissions but Meghan never saw a dollar of her money again. She tried again with another group recommended by someone her mother knew. That group took big management commissions in return for thoughtfully losing only a part of her money – a loss they blamed on “adverse market circumstances”.

“At least Federal agents aren’t involved this time,” thought Meghan.

The death of her father and subsequent, brief poverty had marked Meghan more than she cared to admit, in that she wanted to keep the money she earned, but dollars seemed to flow out the door to buy services she did not really understand and did not know why she needed.

Meanwhile, Connie was developing her own reputation. She got back at a boyfriend who broke her heart by releasing a break up song that went to number one everywhere and forced the ex-boyfriend to undertake relief work in Africa. The singer moved to New York where she had the bad luck/judgment to date a rap artist who turned out to be insanely jealous. A chain of events which started with her exchanging a few, friendly words with the rapper’s major rival at a party culminated in a studio shootout and both men being rushed to hospital.

Connie’s sole contribution to the shootout had been to cower under a music control panel with a back-up singer and her interaction with the rival had been entirely above board, but her boyfriend loudly blamed Connie, and the police interviewed her at length about his allegations before charging both men with various violent crimes. The singer then took her father’s very sensible advice concerning the boyfriend “to dump his arse” and move back to LA. There she bought a large house in Beverley Hills proper and filled it up with a floating cast of music industry wannabees and doubtful hangers-on who amused her.

The music diva dated a good-looking Hollywood producer who got her a part in a romantic comedy destined to go straight to a streaming service. Then she found out, to her horror and mortification, that the producer was not only very much married his wife confronted Connie at a swanky Hollywood party to accuse the singer of deliberately seducing her husband. Security had to intervene. This was all covered in excruciating detail by the media. Because the producer’s wife defended him with such force, Connie found herself cast in the role of husband-stealer.

“I had no idea he was married, Ma,” she told her mother later. “There was no ring, no wife at his place and he never said a word.”

Her mother believed Connie, but the wife proved better at lying than the singer at telling the truth. Far worse the romantic comedy bombed, with the critics making nasty remarks about the husband-stealer’s acting ability, and the fuss affected her music sales.

Faced with the need to rebuild her public image, and after taking advice from a major public relations firm, Connie started talking about the environment. She owned a jet for touring and saw no problem in also using it to fly to conferences and meetings on the environment to give her opinion on the issue, although all she knew of the environment was the view of her Mansion’s back garden from her bedroom window. To add some media spice to her declarations she thought to revive the old feud between herself and Megan-Clarise.

“Look at the rich movie star,” she told reporters. “What has she ever done for the environment?”

Meghan at first ignored this then took advice from the large public relations firm charging big fees – the same one used by Connie, although she did not realise this. The consultant also told her to talk about the environment.

“What am I to say?” she asked.

“Just say we should reduce emissions,” the consultant replied. “The media don’t seem to care much beyond that.”

Meghan thought that sounded too much like catch-up and that, for the fees she was paying, there could have been more creative thinking but she had no idea what else to say. While she was puzzling over this her assistant and best friend Mia declared that she wanted to go out to have drinks with a mega-rich Silicon Valley type. Meghan’s boyfriend of several months, another successful, good-looking-Latin film star type, was out of town for a few days and Meghan-Clarise had agreed to appear at a party thrown by one of the producers of her latest movie.

“But we have this party to go to,” she said.

“We’ll drop in for a drink and then go on to the party,” said Mia. “We can’t appear too early. If you come, he says he can get someone presentable to keep you company while he talks to me.”

“Urgh,” said Meghan, who had adopted high standards when it came to men. “A rich geek with a presentable friend. Are you really into this guy?”

“Never met him. It’s through friends of friends and a sort-of blind date but he says he wants to find out about the film industry. The upside is that he’s got three hundred million,” said Mia. She was about Meghan’s age, short and stocky, with a mop of curly brown hair and a girl next door appeal that meant she did well for herself in attracting men. “He’s gotta be worth talking to, no matter what he looks like, and it’s at that really ritzy club we were talking about.”

“I want to check out that place out,” admitted Meghan. “I’ll talk to this presentable plus one for a while if you want.”

When they got to the club she wore a hood and sunglasses as she often did in public to avoid attention, but the man at the door still waved the two ladies through without question, directing them to the bar section. They found two men in a booth. One was obviously the mega-rich silicon valley geek and the other the presentable plus one, standing up and staring so intently at the screen above the bar that he did not turn around when the ladies come in.

Meghan thought that the plus one was not bad looking, tall with an athletic build, olive skin and a square jaw. Okay she would talk to him for a few minutes if he ever paid attention. They sat down.

“I’m Hap,” said Hap, offering his hand. Clarise placed her hand briefly on Hap’s hand.

“Who’s your friend?” she asked.

CHAPTER TWO

Brett knew what had to be done. The first squad could still be heard firing but it was only a matter of time before the base was over-run by Zomian warrior-bots, and his friend squad leader Buddy Wilcox was in a bad way. They had stopped the bleeding from his wounds but the displays on Buddy’s tablet showed they were running out of options.

“Only thing for it,” said Brett, “is to disable the Zomian control centre. I’ve got to blow it.”

“But that’s two levels down, outside the base,” said Frieda, looking at the displays on Buddy’s console. “You’ll never get there, and the centre’s got defences.”

“She’s right, boss,” said Buddy, gasping. “That thing is armoured and got three of those big-ass chain guns that have been cutting our guys to pieces.”

"I'll have to think of something – it's either that or let ourselves get over run and Buddy here dies," said Brett. "I can get to the elevator shaft from here, get the doors open and use the cables to get down to the garage level."

"Then what?" demanded Frieda. "The warrior-bots are already on this floor. They'll be at least a couple on that level looking for survivors."

"I'll burn that bridge when I come to it. You get Buddy here to a medic, and I'll see you real soon."

"I outrank you," said Frieda. "I could order you not to go."

"Fleet doesn't get involved in land operations, Lieutenant," said Brett.

"Oh! If you won't give up this madness, at least let me do this." She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Kissing?" said Buck, "We're into kissing now?"

"Sure," said Will. "We're going to adolescent, young adult guy market. They'll want a lot more than kissing but if we stop at that and go light on the gore then the parents won't care that their sons are only reading trashy military SF. They'll be happy that their kid is reading something, instead of playing computer games."

"I agree," said Wilma, Buck's wife, from her desk. "A little gore, a little smooching, have a guy and pretty girl on the cover doing dramatic stuff and the book gets a spot in the son's bookcase, instead of under the mattress. We'd even get into libraries."

"Under the mattress would be a lot more profitable," said Buck, wistfully.

"Not while I'm in this company," retorted Wilma. "We may be poor but at least we're ethical."

"We'll go bankrupt with dignity," said Buck.

Buck had a round face, edged with an unkempt beard, lank hair and, to be unkind, a pudgy figure. He had met Wilma, a match in both looks and interests, at a Comic-Con. Almost as part of their marriage vows the pair had set up Buckland Publishing Inc, the international headquarters of which was the garage of their downscale LA home. This company had the honour of publishing the second book in the Stellar Ranger series featuring Technical Sergeant Brett Hardwick by rising author William Moorland. In contrast to the married pair William, or Will to friends, was the square jawed, clean-cut, dark-haired athletic type that could pass muster as an extra in a film pool scene. However, all three spoke the same language of science fiction and fantasy fandom and were dear friends.

"And it marks us out from the Warhammer, Star Wars and Star Trek stuff," said Will.

Buck rolled his eyes. "Flooding the market – who can keep up."

"Keep it small scale, personal and mainly human," said Will, "and maybe we'll all catch a break."

"There was some profit in the first one," conceded Buck, "and a series is always better. We could also try for an audiobook version of the first one and spend a little on marketing."

"Audiobook?" said Will.

"Sure, growing part of the market, and way easier to distribute," said Buck. "We can lodge the audio files on a site, nominate the price and it goes everywhere as downloads. We get to keep maybe half the nominated price. The problem is marketing but first, we've gotta get the book narrated. You any good at narration?"

"Violet says I'm no actor," said Will. "Maybe we'd better hire in."

"Hiring is expensive – couple of thousand to hire through the site, maybe, and you take what you get. But I don't have a couple of thousand. I have to stall the printer when he wants his money as it is – even pulling casual shifts at Digital Megamall."

“Times really are tough,” said Will. “I don’t have it either at the moment. Maybe I can find it later; plus money for marketing, you say?”

“Crowded market,” said Buck. “Whatever money you can get and we can split the revenue.”

“After I get the upfront costs back, just like you get your printer costs back before I see a cent on the printed book.”

Buck shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“How is it going with you and Violet?” asked Wilma.

“Pretty good, I’d say,” said Will. “It all seems to be working. Maybe she’ll make an honest man of me.”

“Really?” said Wilma, trying to sound enthusiastic. “That sounds great.”

Wilma had, in fact, spoken with Violet just a few days previously. An aspiring actress Violet had talked of a theatre opportunity back East, and of a major move which did not seem to include Will. That was the reason she’d asked about Violet. Wilma was now fearful that her good friend would have his heart broken.

“You don’t want to rush into anything,” was all she said.

“Of course not,” said Will, who had a ring in the black canvas shoulder satchel which he always carried with him and planned on presenting it that day. He did not have money for book narration because he had been spending it on rings.

“I’ve got something else,” said Buck grabbing a pile of pages off his desk. “You remember I told you about that college roomie of mine who’s done well in Silicon Valley?”

“How could I forget you know someone who actually has money,” said Will.

“He knows you,” said Buck. “He’s read the first Ranger book and wants to read the second.”

“He did and he does?” said Will, then shrugged. “Having a mega-rich reader is better than not having one, I guess. Shouldn’t you try to get him interested in investing in your business, like fund audiobook development and kickstart those graphic novel projects.”

“Yeah – get things moving,” said Wilma.

“He’s got just three hundred million or so which, according to him, is barely worth mentioning in the Valley,” Buck said. “I tried getting him interested in book publishing but he says what he really wants is to produce a film.”

“It’s LA,” said Will. “Everyone wants to produce films.”

“He’s written this script which he’s asked me to get you to look at.”

“Me? You’ve got that graphic novel guy. He’s got several books out and he’s got a big following – way more established than me.”

“He’s also read those but thinks you’re more serious,” said Buck. “If I humour him, maybe I can get some investment out of him.”

Will took the manuscript and read the title aloud.

“*Robot Zombie Vampire Strippers from beyond Hell Galaxy*. That’s the title? What sort of films did you guys see in college?”

Wilma sighed.

“Those sorts of films,” said Buck, ignoring Wilma. “He’s really into them.”

“It’s not so much a title as a list of genres,” said Will. “Not that I’m against such films but I’m not sure I want to be involved in one.”

“Can you have a look – give him some sort of appraisal?”

Will flicked through the pages.

“Naked girl screaming,” he read. “Cut in half with chainsaw by zombie minion as robot overlord laughs. ‘The time of the human is over. Hell Galaxy Robots will rule.’ At least he keeps the action going.”

“It’s a little rough,” said Buck.

“It’s porno,” said Wilma. “Check out the sex scene in the middle. I read it; now I can’t look at any of my kitchen appliances.”

“Kitchen appliances?” said Will in alarm.

“I’m not repeating any of it,” she said. “Check it out.”

Will sighed. “I’ll look at it but even without reading it I can offer a few comments – getting a production company interested in a script to the point where they are prepared to drop maybe a few million minimum putting it on the screen, is bad enough. Getting interest in anything with a title like *Robot Zombie Vampire Strippers from beyond Hell Galaxy* is a tough ask. In those sorts of films, the producers are pretty much the same people as the directors who’ve managed to get money from somewhere for a cheap film. Good horror films do get made, but not using scripts like this. Your guy’s got money he should do it himself and try to get distribution.”

“He doesn’t know anything about the film industry,” said Buck.

“He can hire people,” said Will. “It’s LA. And he knows about computers. Monster special effects shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Can you look at it and talk to him?” asked Buck. “I said you had contacts in the film industry.”

“Through Vi, sure,” said Will. “Her friends are always talking about films, but they’re mostly bit players. And when I’m not doing trashy SF I’m writing real estate flyers. However, I can find time to talk to a mega-rich person, even if they only have three hundred million or whatever. Just send me his number when you can. Now I’ve got an important date to keep.”

Will noted the strange car in the driveway of the rented condo he shared with Violet but he couldn’t see her car and thought that one of Violet’s friends had given her a lift. Never mind, today was the day. He would pop the question and all would be right with the world. He opened the door and stopped dead. There was a suitcase by the door and cardboard boxes full of her possessions on the table in the kitchen nook. Vi came downstairs at that moment, followed by a man with a full red beard, carrying another box. Will had seen the man before, at a party he thought, but could not recall his name.

“Will, I didn’t expect you home so soon,” said Vi. She was an attractive brunette with a trim figure who favoured pixie cut hairstyles and was obviously embarrassed by the unexpected encounter. “I don’t know if you remember Nolan.”

“Sort of,” said Will, glancing at Nolan.

“I’ll put the stuff in the car,” said Nolan, also obviously embarrassed. He walked out past Will, leaving the pair alone.

“I was going to leave you a note,” said Vi.

“A note?” said Will, “after three years. I even came with you out here.”

“I know, and that was sweet Will,” she said. “But we weren’t going anywhere. You weren’t going anywhere. I wasn’t going anywhere.”

“I was getting books published,” protested Will.

“Your publisher works out of a garage and has to take casual shifts at an IT store to make ends meet,” she said. “You have to write real estate blurbs.”

“I write the real estate copy because I came here with you and it was all I could find. I wasn’t planning on doing it all my life.”

“Then there’s my career,” interrupted Vi. “My agent’s dropped me, and Nolan has got me a part in a production off-Broadway.”

“New York?”

“We’re driving there now,” she said.

“Long drive,” said Will. He had no idea what else to say.

“We’ll do a couple of touristy things on the way. A break.”

Nolan came in through the still open door to pick up the suitcase and left again.

“A break? You’re going with Nolan for a theatre part and putting in vacation time on the way? That’s it after three years?”

“Will, it was time to move on,” she said. “You’re a sweet guy and hot. You’ll find someone else, nice, soon and forget about me.”

“I don’t want to find someone else. I thought we were going well. I thought you were enjoying our time; you were committed to us.”

“Will, I was putting up a front,” she said as if explaining an obvious point to a child. “What can I say, I’m an actress.” She kissed him on the cheek. Will did not move. “Thanks for the good times.”

She left. Nolan came in twice more to pick up boxes. On the second visit he paused to say, “Sorry man.”

Will who had sat down heavily at the kitchen table waved his hand to indicate the door, without looking at the man, but didn’t say anything.

“You want the door left open?”

“Close it and go,” said Will.

He heard Violet and Nolan drive off then pulled the ring case out of his bag and opened it to look at the ring.

“Total idiot,” he muttered to himself. He thrust the case back in the back and went to sit on the condo’s sofa with his thoughts until long after the sun had set.

The condo in the suburb of Los Feliz, a short distance (in LA terms) from both Hollywood and the Valley and the natural haunt of every acting wannabe was hardly expensive but Will’s royalty income was trivial and writing real estate advertising copy did not pay well. An additional problem was that he did not think to cancel the credit card he shared with Vi until the next day when he checked to see if she had used it. She had withdrawn cash up to the daily limit three times, including the day before she left, as well as charging the first night’s hotel, petrol and meals for herself and Nolan on it. This came to three thousand two hundred and twenty three dollars and forty three cents – Will counted it up carefully. Now that really hurt.

Will sold the ring back to the store he got it from, which he found highly embarrassing – the sales lady smiled throughout – and moved to an even dingier apartment in the same neighbourhood. This he shared with Leo who worked in the same digital superstore as Buck, Leo’s Goth girlfriend Pandora, always shortened to Pan, and a billion cockroaches. Leo was a cheerful man who declared that he was into satanism and old Westerns.

“Anything with a shootout, Will,” he said. “I love those shootouts.”

He didn’t say anything about Satanism and Will did not ask.

Pan wanted to set Will up with her Goth girlfriends.

“I have a sad romantic history,” he told her, sore over Vi’s sudden departure. “If any of your friends are interested in a gloomy affair ending in a suicide pact, let me know.”

To Will’s alarm Pan reported that there was some interest in the suicide pact idea, and he had to firmly reject all offers, sight unseen.

“Tell them I’m thinking of turning gay,” he said, “and I’ll have the suicide pact with my new gay partner.”

Will reluctantly took casual shifts at the digital superstore as he knew about computers, fumigated the apartment – the cockroaches were initially discouraged – tried not to think about Vi, which was hard, and read the script. He wrote out some of his thoughts,

trying to be positive, and sent them to Buck to be relayed to the author, Jason Hap, universally called Hap rather than Jason.

Buck received another request from Hap.

“He wants someone presentable to meet for drinks with a female film industry type,” Buck told Wilma. “He’s taken Will’s advice to heart and is trying to find out more about the industry.”

“Is he trying to find out more about the industry or the assistant?” asked Wilma. “If so, why the presentable plus one?”

Buck shrugged. “The assistant is bringing a girlfriend.”

“Oh, okay,” said Wilma. “Then get Will to go. He’s not only presentable he’s way presentable, not to mention single, and Hap wants to talk to him too. Tell Will if he wants his books published then he’s to quit moping around, get his butt along to this bar and play nice.”

Later that day Will fronted up to an exclusive Hollywood nightclub that Violet would have killed to get into, mentioned Hap’s name at the door as instructed and had his identity checked. He found the Silicon Valley tycoon sitting in a booth in the bar section which could accommodate four. Hap motioned Will to sit beside him rather than opposite.

“The ladies will sit there,” he said. “I see you got dressed for the occasion.”

Will was wearing dark suit pants and a sports jacket with a white shirt that was his best outfit, and perhaps the only clothing he had that could be worn in an exclusive club. The tycoon, for his part, was in the Silicon Valley standard of jeans and grey jacket with elbow patches and tee shirt.

“Wilma gave me a talking to about dress standards,” Will said. “I had to describe what I was going to wear and get her approval.”

Hap laughed. “You don’t want to cross Wilma. I was best man at their wedding. I didn’t dare mess up.”

“You’ve done well in the valley, I understand,” said Will. “Are you still in the same venture? Software development aids wasn’t it?”

“Sold out mostly and bought a house closer to Hollywood,” said Hap. “Looking for the next big thing, like everyone else. Oh, okay here are the ladies now.”

Will would have looked but he was distracted by the site of Violet on the TV screen above the bar. She was presenting an exercise aid in a commercial and looked good. Will was vaguely aware of someone sitting opposite him but was so absorbed he did not turn around, instead taking a swig of the foreign beer had had ordered.

He heard someone say, “Who is your friend?” then turned around to find himself looking at a woman he recognised instantly as the famous star Clarise Chalmers.

CHAPTER THREE

One reviewer had commented that Clarise Chalmers had a face that started somewhere around Grace Kelly and ended up at Michelle Pfeiffer via a Victoria Secret angel or two. She had silver blond shoulder length hair that recalled Marilyn Munroe and like Munroe herself, as critics also noted, Clarise Chalmers could light up any film just by being in it. Add in her reputation as a party animal and bad girl, of which Will was well aware, and the result was a sexual appeal bombshell that exploded in the writer’s face.

About to swallow a mouthful of light beer, Will did what any red-blooded American guy would when do in the circumstances - he choked and sat down coughing so hard that Hap patted him on the back.

“When he recovers his name is Will,” said the multi-millionaire.

After some spluttering, thinking how humiliating it all was, Will managed to say “It is a great honour to meet you, Ms Chalmers. I’ve admired your films.”

Hap ordered drinks for the ladies.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Will,” said Meghan-Clarise, amused. She never got tired of the effect she had on good looking men, particularly if they were polite about their admiration as Will had just been. “What do you do in Hollywood?”

Will knew that he had not a hope in all creation of interesting Clarise Chambers and, in any case, after Violet he was wary of actresses, so he thought that he would not lose anything by saying the first thing that came into his head.

“I’m the very lowest of the Hollywood low, Ms Chalmers,” he said, remembering how Violet had been so dismissive of his books. “You really shouldn’t be seen with me. Think of your reputation.”

“My reputation is already trash,” said Clarise, amused. “But thanks for thinking of it. You’re an assistant producer?”

“Royalty compared to me. Their assistants return my calls to tell me to go away.” Will had never tried to call as assistant producer and wasn’t exactly sure what they did, but it seemed a fair bet.

“I see. Stage hand?”

“They’re allowed on set. The likes of me are warned off by security if we’re lucky. If we’re unlucky we’ll get beaten up in a back room.”

“That is bad. Executive assistant?”

“When they do return my calls to their bosses, they sneer at me.”

“Okay, Will, I give up, what do you do?”

“I’m a writer.”

Clarise laughed, surprising Mia who was engrossed in her conversation with Hap.

“Yes, that is low,” said the star. “But not so low that I can’t be seen in a bar with you. I can always just say I didn’t want to be rude.”

It was Will’s turn to laugh. “You remember that old film *Shakespeare In Love*?”

“Actually, I do,” said Clarise, who had studied Shakespeare as part of her unfinished degree. “Good film.”

“You might remember a part during rehearsals for the first production of Romeo and Juliette when someone points to Shakespeare who’s talking to the actors and asks the theatre manager ‘Who’s he?’ And the manager says, ‘Oh he’s no-one, he’s just the author’. Now if they’re going to say that about the greatest playwright of all time, what are they going to say about someone who writes trashy military SF for fourteen year olds? You’ll need a better excuse for talking to me.”

Will had recovered enough to appreciate that Clarise was braless underneath a low-cut, red club dress (the jacket with the hood had been cast aside) and was struggling not to leer.

The actress giggled softly. She had noticed Will’s struggles and was amused by them. “You’re not trying to sell yourself at all here are you, Will. Men usually sell themselves to me.”

“You would have seen through all of that in a split second, Ms Chalmers. I’m also a nerd as well as a writer. I even have a theory about Darth Vader.”

She laughed again. Will thought that Violet would have killed for a chance to have a drink with Clarise Chalmers.

“This keeps getting worse and worse,” the actress said. “Please don’t tell me your theory about Darth Vader. A boyfriend in college got me to watch the first three movies produced. That’s several hours of my life I won’t get back. Let’s talk about something else.”

“You can always turn this meeting to your advantage,” said Will, “you can say you’ve met a nerd and a writer and they’re not so bad. You can’t let them into the neighbourhood as they bring down property prices, but otherwise they’re okay. Shows that you’re broadminded.”

“As it happens, Will, my life is plagued by writers,” she said.

“It is, why?”

“I need them, so consultants tell me, for my website, Twitter – sorry, X – account, as well as for Instagram, Facebook, Tinder and I don’t know what else besides, all to develop my image.”

“Pardon me, Ms Chalmers but what are you doing on Tinder? It’s a dating app and you have a boyfriend, some big star.”

“Robin Hawke. You read the media news, Will?”

“I knew someone in the acting scene here for a time,” said Will. “Also, why bother to develop anything on Instagram? It’s good for Eastern European models who want to build a profile, but you’re already a star with fans in the millions. You use it to boost your next film or endorsement. If you don’t have anything to sell then send off a couple of pics of you, I dunno, looking fabulous at the latest glitzy star event, with details about where it is. Same for Facebook and X and whatever else. Just keep your millions of fans interested with the occasional bulletin until you’re ready to push something. Needs some writing but not much.”

“I see,” said Clarise, leaning back – Will had to be careful not to look down - and eyeing the writer quizzically. “You use social media yourself much, Will.”

“Some, although I have my doubts about how much my fan base, such as it is, looks at X or Facebook. They’ll look at Instagram, but they’d be way more interested in Eastern European models than my stuff.”

“I also get scripts from writers all the time,” Charise said. “All with shower scenes.”

“You have a reputation for such scenes, Ms Chalmers. I hope you don’t mind if I say I have found them interesting myself, but I guess you want to move beyond them,” said Will.

“Maybe,” said Clarise, thinking that Will had been suitably respectful in the way he had admitted to liking her shower scenes.

“You remember Sharon Stone and the film from way back, *Basic Instinct*.”

“With the interrogation scene where she isn’t wearing underwear,” said Clarise. “She says she was tricked into doing that.”

“That’s right,” said Will, “but the film made her, and it otherwise has a certain style. It’s not solely about the characters simulating sex. Then there is the case of Jacqueline Bisset’s wet tee shirt in the film *The Deep*.”

“Haven’t heard of that one.”

“It’s a 70s film so way back. As you’d expect from the name a lot of it is underwater and Ms Bisset wears a wet, see-through tee shirt for the first few minutes of the film. A shot of her in that tee shirt underwater which she did not authorise was a feature of the film’s publicity campaign. She also says that no-one, including her, realised how see through it was until they looked at the actual shots much later. But the sight of Ms Bisset in that shirt made the film. I read one unkind review that said the film was only worth watching for that scene. It’s even credited with starting the fad of wet tee-shirt contests. My point, Ms Chalmers, is that sex still sells, big time.”

“Hmmm!” said Clarise, still eyeing Will. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“My life at the moment is so interesting I’ve had time to look at film clips on YouTube,” said Will. “On the other side of the sex coin, there’s Charlize Theron in the film *Monster*; a biopic about the only known female serial killer. She deliberately put on thirty pounds for the role and won both the Academy Award and the Golden Globe for best actress

that year. More importantly, as far as Hollywood was concerned, the film was also a big commercial success.”

“Thirty pounds!” exclaimed Clarise.

“And she lost it again – an important point for most women.”

“Look at the time,” said Mia, suddenly, getting up. “We want to be just fashionably late to that party. Good to meet you, Will.”

“And you,” said Will.

“This has been most interesting Will,” said Clarise, also standing up. She turned to go then turned back again. “Before I go what is your take on this thing with Connie Leighton.”

“The singer?” said Will. “You ladies have some sort of history I seem to recall reading. She’s been saying stuff about you.”

“I’m not jetting around talking about the environment enough.”

“Oh right, now I remember,” said Will. “But there is an obvious snap back, isn’t there?”

“Is there?”

“Sure, all she’s really doing is flying into climate conferences on a private jet, telling poor people not to use energy, and flying away again. Doesn’t sound very constructive to me.

Clarise thought about this. “Should I say that?”

“Not quite like that,” said Will, a little surprised that she was taking him seriously.

“Maybe say if Leighton really wants to save emissions she’d do a lot more by trading in her private jet for a bicycle than talking about it.”

“Hmmm!” said Clarise.

“If reporters persist say that emissions are a complex problem and governments should do more, which is basically all Leighton is saying. Then walk away.”

“Okaaaay.. most interesting to meet you, Will,” she said and left.

Will’s first act after the ladies left was to bury his head in Hap’s shoulder.

“All I did was babble,” he said, his voice muffled by the entrepreneur’s jacket. Hap patted him on the head with his other hand in mock sympathy.

“There, there,” he said, amused.

At the door to the bar, Clarise looked back, saw this byplay, and giggled. Most gratifying.

“I almost told her my theory on Darth Vader. Thank the lord she stopped me.”

“I heard the name. What is your theory on Darth Vader?”

Will sat up. “That he’s really the good guy trying to hold the empire together, and that the real villain is Luke Skywalker, who was out to grab parts of the Empire for himself”

“Okay,” said Hap, nodding. “I understand. It’s a good theory but maybe someone like Clarise Chalmers is not quite ready for it.”

“Maybe,” said Will. “You didn’t tell me a famous star was coming?”

Hap spread his hands. “I didn’t know. I just thought the assistant would bring another assistant type, not the star herself. Anyway, don’t beat yourself up, you made her laugh a couple of times.”

“I guess,” said Will.

“You can now tell cute girl next door types that you’ve met Clarise Chalmers. It’s a good first date story.”

“Hap, I like your thinking,” said Will, brightening up. “First dates with cute next door types sound more viable if I have a story like that to tell, and I might not babble.”

“There’s room for hope,” said Hap. “I also wanted to talk about the script. You say there’s no point in trying to show it around?”

“Nope. I wouldn’t know where to start but you certainly wouldn’t get any of the major agents, producers or studios interested in anything like that. You want to get out of

here and grab some fast food? I'll offer comments then. This place is way too fancy for my tastes."

"Why not," said Hap.

They adjourned to a burger place down the road, sitting opposite one another on the communal table.

"You could make the script more palatable while leaving in some of the elements you have."

"I'm listening," said Hap.

"First off let's dump the sex and slaughter scene involving kitchen appliances. That's non-negotiable."

"Awww!" said Hap. "I liked that scene."

"Poor Wilma read it and now can't bring herself to turn on her kitchen blender. The world is not ready for such a scene. There are also continuity issues as it doesn't really fit with much else in the story."

"Suppose...," said Hap.

"But you have these slasher demons that rise from the depths – this hell dimension – to kill randomly, mostly pretty girls. Let's keep that as one element."

"Still listening," said Hap.

"Have you heard of a music festival called Balaton Sound?"

"Can't say that I have," said Hap, surprised at the sudden change in subject. "Where is Balaton Sound?"

"It's in Hungary," said Will. "There's a lake South West of Budapest called Lake Balaton. I only know this because I looked it up after seeing clips on YouTube. Basically, it's big and loud and features water activities – a swimming pool, people messing around in the lake, pretty girls dancing with hunky, bare-chested guys. All meat for these slasher demons."

"Okay, you think the massacre should be staged at this festival?"

"The festival itself isn't important. I just mention it as a starting point. You can saw off something like that, with its unbelievable crowds, entertainments, and even carnival attractions, push it into the distant future and stick it on top of some ruins. Then it becomes a New World Party Town."

"Party town?"

"Sure, in the far future, after we've been through wars, diseases and environmental degradation and whatever, humanity has reached this good place where they can send their young people to these party towns for a break from the grim reality of rebuilding the world – a sort of annual ritual where they can dance and frolic semi-naked in water."

"I'm feeling this more," said Hap.

"The trouble is that these wars and troubles have also generated monsters – formerly humans that have somehow mutated into hostile slashing machines. No one has seen them for some time and it's assumed that they are all dead. Party Town has been put on top of an old war ruin because it still has facilities which can be adapted for the fun and frolicking. Access to the under-layers has been sealed off but, well, these demons find a way in and start taking out party goers. Your heroes – the security team maybe – then find the bodies gruesomely dismembered, but those running the place don't believe that it's these demons and so on. It then has elements of a future Jaws out of water."

"Sounds good, man," said a student type seated a little down from them getting up to leave. "Hope it gets up."

"Oh, thanks," said Will.

"Some of my scenes are part of this?" said Hap.

"Incorporated into the plot – you don't have much of a plot in your script."

The entrepreneur was silent for a moment.

“You think I should rewrite with that basic idea? It’s your idea.”

“I have too many ideas,” said Will. “I can give one away and it’s Hollywood, scripts are rewritten all the time.”

“What chance would the script have then?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you – still very little,” said Will. “There are a billion scripts out there and a lot of hard-driving people pushing their ideas. I’m not very competitive, so it’s not the scene for me. I prefer to write military SF novels and have the occasional fan show appreciation. Can’t ask for more.”

“Hmmm!” said Hap. He took another bite of his hamburger. “Buck said something about making it myself. How much would that cost?”

“When a fellow banker once asked J.P. Morgan how much it cost to own a yacht, he replied that ‘if you have to ask you can’t afford it’. A few million at least for anything halfway decent, and it’s got to be money you’re happy to lose. Lots of films don’t make back their production costs. Maybe you can get it into late night sessions at fringe movie theatres, to see what audiences make of it. One of the streaming services desperate for content might pick it up at a cut rate if it’s not too bad. I’ve seen weirder stuff on those things.”

“A few million you say?”

“At least – depending on what you want to do, what sort of actors you want to hire and so on. You won’t get anyone like Clarise Chalmers for that money but there are plenty of wannabes around.”

“Crowd scenes are expensive, aren’t they?” said Hap.

“Computer graphics does wonders. Use blue or black back drops, or whatever it is they use, for everything and add the backgrounds later, like they did for the Sin City movies. You still gotta have actors and a film crew but with CGI you can set it anywhere. If you want to talk about it further I sort of know a director, an Evan Zagame, who’s in this area. He’s been involved in exactly one film for fringe markets.”

“Which film?”

“Zombie Nazis in LA.”

“It was okay,” said Hap. “But cheap. Effects were stupid. How do you know this guy?”

“I was on the fringe of the film industry here for a time through a girl friend who dumped me. We got to talking at a party.” All of the people Will knew in LA had been through Violet and he had not tried to contact any of them since she had left, but he thought he could find the wanna-be director. “He’s never had any money to make a film. Common problem with film makers.”

“What’s the next step?”

“Get the script into shape and show it to him, but as I said he’s got absolutely no money to make anything. You have to pay him. However, that means you have control of the project. Be firm on the story.”

“You know, Jason Hap film producer has a certain ring to it,” said Hap, taking another bite from his hamburger. “And it sounds like way more fun than producing software development tools. Maybe I’ll take the next step, but I’ve got to tie up other stuff. Do you want to do this script rewrite?”

“Hap, I’d do it but not for free,” said Will. “It’s your project and a slasher zombie film is not how I see myself as a writer.”

“Fair enough,” said Hap. “I can pay out some, maybe a few thousand.”

“Okay, ten thousand.”

“Five,” said Hap, straight away.

Will sighed. He should have made his first bid fifteen. Too late now. “Well, seven and a half then, and that’s dirt cheap for a script.”

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

