

80

by their fruits

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It is 4:30pm in Times Square and they are finishing the set up for tonight's festivities. With the stagehands wrapping up the sound check and the pens for crowd control having been roped off, all they need now is the Master of Ceremonies, the musical act and the regulation milling throng to set things alight.

Mikhail Popov has been the MC for as long as he has been on the Tonight Show and he is sick and tired of it. It is his last New Year's as MC and, at his insistence, they have The Cover Girls for tonight. Not say, Brittney and the Cover Girls—just The Cover Girls. This act is all about doing covers of other artist's work, while trying to best them, and with a virtual galaxy of pop and rock spanning three centuries in the public domain they never seem to run out of material.

The Cover Girls was Brittney's springboard to stardom, but she has kept in touch and in good standing with the band ever since her replacement took the reins. The two will be performing together so it will be like a time-loop paradox for the fans who'll be watching.

Because of that, the NYPD expects a huge crowd for tonight.

For three years now the New Year's Eve Event Committee has pushed hard to lure Adolphina Herrero here to activate the ball drop all because of the CMH. What Adolphina feared did come true, that being everybody has started to look at her differently after having been awarded the damned thing. In spite of it feeling like a boat anchor around the neck, her signature *Cubanaza* war cry is more popular now than ever—all because that's what everyone can hear her shouting over her body cam when she ran into that fight and while blowing the shit out of the Taliban and their guns from rampart to parapet.

Tía loca Adolphina is decidedly *personae grata* in spades now.

At first there were accusations that her CMH was a publicity stunt, and this incensed the US Marine Corp to no end because they take this shit very seriously. Against policy their Commandant had her body cam feed for that day released to the public which shot gunned those voices into silence. It's been said that her footage puts every version of *Hardcore Henry* to utter shame, and the same is said to be true for Queen Victoria. When queries were made there—her footage went out and that roundly put the smack-down to her naysayers.

There is absolutely no doubt in anyone's mind that Victoria earned her VC fair-an'-square that day, it's just that she didn't have too. Victoria, like pretty much everyone outside the SA, do not know their training regime, their tactics nor could they understand why the troops kept kissing the ground the way they were—which was to let the scorpion guns do their thing! The extra body and gun cam video from the fire team showed Victoria fighting like a lion, yes, and it was spectacular to watch, but those feeds had the data, targeting displays and tacnet audio channels redacted...for security reasons.

Only thing said by the fire team is, "*It was a hell of a fight!*"

Anyway, with Adolphina are her sisters, Agatha and Ophilia, who were asked to tag along, and with them came Mac and Léon. Where her sisters were thrilled to be coming here Mac and Léon had to be dragged, grumbling and whining all the way to New York. It's not that they were opposed to coming here, it's just that they are annoyed by the octodroid cameras following them everywhere they go anymore.

The production company's new representative was thrilled to hear that the three were opening a restaurant together, and she did suggest a spin off, but Léon put his foot down to the idea. With some arm twisting by Monique he did agree to allow the cameras to follow them, like tonight, so that they can get footage for the main show, and maybe do a special or two surrounding their project, but the bottom line is that Monique is right and you cannot thumb your nose at free publicity! This is especially true when he plans to simultaneously open three of the *olá* restaurants in Los Angeles, New Sydney and Paris on the same night this coming May.

Ever since Stewart Myers was found dead two weeks ago his most recent silent partner, who brought in a massive influx of capital, became not so silent overnight. Still, nobody knows who the guy is but his representative, this hot-n-feisty little skinny thing named Samantha, is going around to each production asking a metric fuck-ton of questions. Yea, their world under Stewart was pretty bad but how could it be better under people with absolutely no production or show business experience? Truth be told, Samantha's toothy grin, turquoise eyes, Aussie lilt and sardonic wit has cut through the bullshit like a flaming scythe, and where everyone has built walls around their IP out

of self-preservation, this pretty-little sprite of a dirty-blond has torn right through those barriers as if they were tissue paper.

Still, everyone was expecting the very worst from these new people because, bucking the system right out of the chute, they dumped the union crews in New York and brought in off-world scabs for tonight. While Léon and Mac were in the broadcasting trailer to touch base with Samantha, in comes three huge and intimidating union bosses who start by making veiled threats. With an attitude for someone five times her size she tells them to shove off, with a snort, and what comes next is where the little pixie wins over the crew.

Now making direct threats of violence to the production team and the scabs—Samantha steps up to them, kicks one of their legs out, hyper-extending his knee joint, smashes another's clavicle, then to the one who was making said threats, she breaks his jaw in three places with her elbow, followed with, "We don't make threats, love."

Mac and Léon led the applause...

In the top penthouse overlooking Times Square, taking the entire floor of his new hotel on Broadway, between 43rd and 44th Streets, Boxter gives Samantha a little kiss and hug, and as he pulls back he says with a smile, "Making friends I hear?"

"Making the most of the moment, me papa!"

Boxter notices Adolphina, her sisters, with Leon and Mac, so as he motions them forward he says, "You have a whole battalion down there, so let them handle the messy business, shall we? Try not to dirty your hands." He smiles asking, "Think they'll be trouble?"

She snickers, "To break the monotony, I certainly hope so!"

"You are sooo like your father. I'm gonna have to have words with him." He turns to Adophina and, "Madame Herrero!"

Adolphina offers her hand to Boxter, "Mr. Hartcourt. I'm very pleased to meet you, Sir..." While shaking hands, Piper walks in so Adolphina suddenly does a double take, "Piper!"

"Dolphi!" With Piper slipping in for a hug, she first points to everyone for Boxter, "Here we have Agatha, Ophilia, Mac and Léon!" After she hugs Adolphina, she looks to Léon and, "Just so you know, dear sir, we're gonna be neighbors on the Church Key! Tabula Pasta, it's a passion project of mine, and it's so good to finally meet you!"

Léon is pleasantly surprised, "*Bonjour madame, le plaisir est à moi! Et oui*, we are sharing the liquor license on the key!"

Piper nods, "Yes, at first I was opposed to that arrangement, but now that I crunch the numbers it's a smidge more profitable."

"Oui, madame, the numbers surprised me as well."

"If your menu is anything like at the quinceañera then I believe that my operation will be in serious trouble."

"Madame, we have no crossover, and I dare say we actually complement each other!"

As Piper chats everyone up, Adolphina says, "Mr. Hartcourt."

Boxter smiles, "Boxter, if you please."

Adolphina seems concerned, "Box-ter, you wanted to see us. Is there something you would like to discuss or maybe change?"

"Oh, no, your program is one of the few productions that is in very good standing. In fact, you have asked for no increase in share since its inception, and it is...ridiculously profitable."

"I had this same discussion with Stewie so let's not beat around the bush. Money I got. Stupid amounts I got. Here is how we look at it, this is ad time that we get paid for. Our business gets bigger and bigger each season we are on so, no. IF we take a bigger cut from ad revenue then you got to start charging more for it so, no, we do not want to rock this boat."

Boxter frowns with a huff, "I wish more people had their head on their shoulders as squarely as you."

"So, when are you going to be announced to the production company and subsidiaries? Everybody is talking about it."

"Oh, that...well, Samantha is actually in control of everything in your world. She's the boss, not I."

Adolphina rears back slightly, "Then why is she going around saying you are a dick to work for?"

Boxter gives a little laugh, then, "Oh, that, imagine her going around saying she is large and in charge? Pretty little nymph like that would get nowhere fast. Say she works for me and that I'm a bit of an arse then, well, when on common ground then everybody seems to feel free enough to open up to her, and they have!"

Adolphina blinks and says, "I think I understand."

"Imagine their surprise when my Samael is unveiled as CEO!" He points into the air, "I do hold seat as chairman, but she will be making all the calls going forward. My trust lies in her."

He gestures to the family pouring in to meet them, "The real reason for bringing you here is that the family, my wife and girls to be exact, their secret little pleasure is watching your program and they wanted to invite you up for chowders! We'll be serving grilled bumble

and yabby tails we brought in from the stumps.”

Adolphina wonders, “I’ve heard of yabby tails.”

“These are from my own stock pond. They’re well fed and very yummy! In fact, after harvesting we feed them fresh pineapple!” Noticing a link-up invite, Boxter points to his ear saying, “I must take this. It’s sad to say that Piper and I will not be here for dinner, but Samantha and the family would love to have you!”

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It may be 4:30pm Tuesday afternoon in New York but it’s 7:30am Wednesday morning in Sydney. That would be Sydney down under in Australia—where by comparison it is Wednesday morning, 7:51 local time here in New Sydney on Sapphire! The people here in New Sydney always love counting down with their namesake sister city and, even though they had to wait twenty-one extra minutes past local midnight, it was well worth the wait and a hell of a party to boot.

New Brisbane has to wait until next year for theirs.

The casinos and bars on the Church Key and New Darwin were filled to the gills and, like all of the joint city countdowns of the past, everybody here had a few too many. Joint countdowns average about every four years or so, so it makes it kind of special.

For the life of her, Jessica cannot understand why people get all psyched up and goofy stupid drunk over something as innocuous as a tic mark on a calendar. To her it’s just another day and she realizes that she is the odd-ball thinking this is all kinda lame.

Jessica rings the doorbell to one of the prized south-east corner apartments in the Spike, half a kilometer up and right under her own apartment, it takes almost a minute for the door to open and when it does Cyzk says with surprise, “Jessica!”

She blows past him and steps into the living room, and with the master bedroom doors open she sees Maroochy Dan laying in the bed. She can feel that her eyes are open a crack and watching her.

After closing the door, Cyzk steps up to Jessica while holding a towel around his waist saying, “This is unexpected!”

“Yes, it is, Kacper.” With a simple thought, Cyzk’s eyes roll up into his head, so Jessica pushes against his chest and he falls back into the sectional then slides off onto the floor.

Dan is up in a flash, she rolls out of bed naked, snatches her breezeblock pistol from the nightstand, and charges the door where she suddenly drops to her knees. The muscles along her spine spasm

and her back contorts and twists in excruciating pain.

With a yelp, Dan falls back onto the floor and is unable to move her now paralyzed body. Jessica steps over her and takes a knee between Dan's legs—pulling the weapon from her limp hand.

"You know, for a super-model, you're sure fast on your feet!" Jessica ejects the magazine, does a single hand press-check like a pro, then glances back at Cyzk, "Now I know why you're with Kacper! He's got a gorgeous package..." She tosses the weapon under the bed and flips the magazine under the sectional while saying, "So much so it makes me wanna muscle in on that action...and you can swallow it all the way down?" Jessica stands and nods, "Girl, that's talent!"

As Jessica steps over to reach up on top of a tall cabinet, she makes Dan involuntarily and painfully crawl to the sectional, and with Dan rolling over, her back up against Cyzk, Jessica continues, "So you pull your tongue back? Great tip! I gotta remember that! You know, I'm really into guys, one guy in particular, and sad to say I only have one girlfriend with benefits! Cloé Khumalo, ever hear of her?"

Dan hisses between her teeth, "Bullshit!"

From the top of the cabinet Jessica pulls a remote for the huge television-monitor, and brushes the dust off on her BDU pants, "Well, when have I ever lied to you!"

Jessica flashes into Dan's mind a memory of her giving Cloé head, and with Dan's eyes bugging out, startled by such vivid imagery, Jessica asks, "Convincing...no? How's this!" While pushing buttons on the remote she gives Dan a view of them naked, with Cloé crying in her arms as they kiss, "Happy tears! She gets so emotional...and I find it ironic that my boyfriend gives better head than she does, but ya gotta give her high marks for her many heroic efforts!"

With a subnet linking starting to spool up, Jessica tosses the remote back up on the cabinet while scoping her body out, "You know, where Cloé is like coffee and cream, you're more of a hot coco!"

Dan tries to move, "I wanna kick your ass!"

"Fucken-A, you are badass hot!" Jessica breaths deep, lightly stroking then pinching her own nipples through her t-shirt while saying, "Next time you see me, Coco Puffs." She exhales and breaths, "Feel free to pin me to the nearest wall!" Jessica then mockingly wiggles her hip towards her, "Maybe I'll just cave in or...maybe not?"

Dan hisses with a snarl, "Take that chance now, let me up!"

Jessica crosses her arms and touches her lip saying, "Is this where I tea-bag you? Seriously, I don't want to get somethin' started we can't finish before we, you know...get interrupted!"

Just then Boxter flashes up on the screen, "Hello, my dear Jessica, and how are you this fine New Year's?"

Jessica scrunches up with, "Ever so ducky, babe!"

"Major General, Dan. The Black Swan herself!"

Dan glances down at her naked body, then throws her head back and almost sobs at the indignity of the moment, "Please!"

Jessica takes the towel Cyzk dropped and pulls it over her body, "Better? I prefer eyein' the menu, but that's me."

Boxter huffs a laugh, "One should strive to maintain a modest dignity in all ways, especially at your lofty station, General."

Dan lifts her head up and says, "You're Chancellor Hartcourt."

"Pro tem, for the now." He breaths deep, "You know who I am but you do not know...who I am."

Dan almost snarls, "Riddles?"

"Not quite, my dear. Just a statement of fact."

"I take it you want something."

Boxter nods, "Yes, your life."

"Stop bashing me ears and get on with it!"

"Oh, no-no-no! We want to...preserve your life." Dan looks confused so he adds, "There are so many miss-understandings in our world that we want to extend a little, as one may say, olive-branch to you before things start to get out of hand. Which will be soon."

"What the bloody fuck do you want!" Dan nods towards Jessica and points out, "She's one of them!"

"Aaand, one of us." Boxter nods, "You'd be surprised how flexible and far reaching loyalty can be for some. How inviolable and unyielding it becomes when working towards a...mutual greater good."

"What do you want?"

"With the new chancellor coming on board next month, along with General Bristol at the helm—"

"That bang-fuck!"

"Yes, exactly my point." He then gives his stock evil-wicked frown, "See, it's saddens me to say there are going to be many attempts to rid us of both, especially to frag Bristol. Now, his son, who is remarkably competent at field command, will not turn on his father so they will steer clear of him. For the young Bristol I do not need to intercede but, for you, dear Maroochy, parties similarly injured as you

will be shortly, will actively seek your...assistance to reach him."

Jessica urges her to, "Listen up now!"

Boxter adds, "Your competence is a threat to Bristol and he plans to sideline you, to bury you deep under the general staff. Specifically, he is considering a bloody-colorful procurement slot for you, and I know this for a fact."

"I lose my field commission?"

"Oh yes, my dear. Those orders have been drafted."

Dan is pissed and snarls, "That nob!"

"See, General, winning this war is an illusion. I already know we are destined to lose to the Annex. Long ago that die was cast and what can we say of command but, by their fruits ye shall know them. This time next week you too will be able to come to that foregone conclusion without our guidance. Point being, I can extend to you an alternative to budgets and specs and pinching pennies—oh my!"

Dan's eyes roll up and her seething rage towards Bristol shines through, "I'm listening, Mr Hartcourt."

"Might I suggest you resign your commission and come hunker down with me in Security Services, for the time being. When this all blows over in a couple of years you will be instrumental in helping me pick up the pieces. What say you?"

"What if I say no?"

"If you don't take me up on my offer, when they fail to frag ol' bushy-tailed Bristol, and they will fail, he will find a way to implicate you and others. He seeks to rid general staff of those he perceives as threats in the worst possible way." Boxter then gives his signature evil-grin, "Aaaand firing squads are most effective towards that end."

Dan blinks and, "I need to think about this."

"To make a clean getaway you must resign your commission before Friday, noon. You do not want to be in the cross-hairs during the blame game that follows. Heads are going to roll after Friday, lots of them, and it won't be the ones who deserve said blame."

Jessica urges her to, "Think fast, Coco Puffs! In our post war world of holdin' hands, workin' together and kumbaya, if you smarten up and submit your resignation before the shit-flinging-n-fan fest comin' this very weekend—I can guarantee that you will get what you want more than anything else in the world."

Jessica is pointing towards Boxter who smiles warmly at Dan, "Of our post war goals, *you* will lead the charge against...the kOri."

Dan's eyes bug out and she asks, "We're not playing, right?"

"Oh, most assuredly, it's fangs out." Boxter nods, "Think fast, General Dan. Time is a luxury you do not possess!"

Jessica asks, "We done here?"

Boxter smiles, "Yes, my dear. I think we covered everything. Will I be seeing you in a short bit?"

"Yup!"

Jessica has pulled a small EMP node from her pocket, and now holding it out at arms distance she hits the button. All electronic and digital tech is smacked down and goes black. Unlike the military PBDi units, personal PBDi units cache and write after 20 minutes.

Realizing her body is back under her control, Dan pulls herself to her knees beside Cyzk, and as the devices in the room start to boot back up Jessica shrugs, "Your cache just got fried."

Dan says, "Thanks for cleaning up."

"No prob! And to cover my tracks with Kacper I gave him a memory from my boyfriend, Josav, sandwiched between me and Cloé. Yeeea, I finally gave in! Tried to tell Cloé it was more work than it was worth, but hey?" Jessica starts to walk out, "Don't be asking uncle Kacper 'bout it 'cause it'll make him feel unclean."

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It's now 4:45pm and Maria and Cricket are here and waiting for Boxter to finish with Jessica. Maria already knows what's going on there and this is the only way Jessica could get to Maroochy Dan. Yes, the Major General would be a huge asset for them if they can bring her around and keep her alive, so Jessica had her blessings.

Offering her the kOri was a concessional lure she could afford.

Maria was thoroughly surprised to find her mother and family here rubbing elbows with the Harcourt's, but she knew Adolphina was going to co-host tonight with Mikhal Popov, and they all met Piper last November, and Maria was going to pick Boxter and Piper up here at the hotel so—she shouldn't be so damned surprised!

What threw Maria for a loop, and shouldn't have, was to hear that Boxter, knowing who the Honey Badgers were gunning after, purloined Stewart Myers' majority production holdings by leveraging an investment portfolio to contractually swap non-voting proxy-shares for Myers' controlling shares if he were to die!

Gee, who could have seen that coming?

After hugging her family, Maria and Cricket were introduced to Boxter and Piper's daughters. Their oldest, also named Piper, is an exact carbon-copy of her mother in every way except the gray. The next three were uniquely their own people, but the fifth and youngest one was striking to say the least! It requires some mental gymnastics to envision this but, if you take our chiseled-weathered venerable Boxter and trans-morph him into a young twenty-something energetic female go-getter, then Samantha nails it!

Maria instantly sees the one difference—the underlining primal rage that drives Boxter is not here in Samantha. She has his wolf-like predatory focus for damned sure, but that righteous malevolence that courses through his veins is missing and probably for the better.

Boxter has suddenly switched his office walls from occluded to transparent, a common sign the occupant is now approachable, and as Maria slips away to see him she runs into Sheron Pilliod by his now open door, "I was hoping I'd stumble into you, Trooper."

Sheron nods, "Happy New Year's, Marshal Ramirez."

"It's Maria when off the clock but, unfortunately, we're talking business. We are rehydrating Mook but you and Clint turned down bumps to staff-sergeant because you both wanna fly fighters?"

Sheron shrugs, "You can't do both."

"Oh, yes you can."

"Depends on who you work for."

"You work for me. Everybody works for me." Maria shifts to a more relaxed posture saying, "See, you turning down a promotion like that is, like, okay only nut cases and narcissistic rich kids can think in terms like that."

Sheron huffs with a smirk, "Piss off, ya wristy."

"Okay!" Maria snickers, then, "Okay, how 'bout the two of you step-up and I guarantee you get your wings but...Cajun Rules?"

"They don't apply." Sheron smiles thinking, "See, everybody wants to be an ace, but after a week on the island I learn that spooky, we love Thumper! We are in rapture with Thumper."

Maria nods, "For CAS, we have great pilots."

"Ya think? Twice on the island my ass was in a sling an' those guys *somehow* managed to sneak in and got me out of a fucking jam. I really, *really* wanna make that kind of difference."

"Yea, I was right, nut cases and rich kids." Maria glances at Boxter then back at Sheron, "Just so you know, Zazueta is bringing a training company of Sikhs. It's the last cycle from Cue Ball and he was

the one straight up asking for you and Clint."

Sheron nods, fully convinced that what she said is a half-truth at best, "Okay, since it's Zaz, okay."

"Help me get Mook back up on its feet, get this company up to speed and you'll be on track to get those wings." Maria gives her a hug, "Happy New Year, Sheron."

With Sheron gone, Maria steps up to Boxter and shakes his hand, with him asking, "Is this...Zazueta a good leader?"

Maria nods, "He's smart, aggressive, takes the right risks and where he gets all his luck is beyond me?"

"All luck runs out eventually."

Maria shrugs, "Yea, I keep telling myself that."

"Before we go, I was wondering if what we are going to watch tonight is going to...change what we currently have going on?"

Maria shakes her head, "Nope!"

"That's good to hear." Boxter nods and then asks, "You took Fifty-Two off the leash. Eight informed me."

"You're wondering if that was smart or not?"

"You read my mind."

"No...no, probably not, but I had to take that chance."

"Like tonight."

Maria looks him in the eye and wonders, "We are not working together but...in a way we are."

"Common goals?"

"Yea..." Maria dares to ask, quietly, "why?"

Boxter digs deep and, "It's complicated."

"Jessica says she can trust you."

"Jessica can see me for who I am." He points up into the air, "To risk sounding cliché, blessed are those who believe without seeing and, yet, this is something you cannot afford to do by a long shot. For your peace of mind, do not turn your back to me." He then gives a little chuckle with pursed lips, "Stabby-stabby!"

Maria smiles with a suppressed laugh, "Well, just so you know here's a belated Christmas present for ya, cupcake five-eight-five is on standby. That Sword of Damocles thingy I told you about when I first met you? Remember?"

"How could one forget?"

"It's on permanent standby. We shut it down."

Boxter thinks about it, "Most appreciated, but is that wise?"

"No, probably not, but I've been taking crazy chances lately." Maria smiles, "It's funny how you had a squad shadowing him."

"People originally assigned to him, to protect him. We wanted Kip to know we were there to...help." Boxter gives a little laugh, "It's a knee slapper how that beard and all the flowing hair and business casual, how...nobody has been able to peg him! For the life of me I never would have thought that possible?"

"He is the only reason FIS has not fallen apart, yet."

"Cricket Washington, she has proven to be...savvy. As for the rumor mill surrounding Wilkinson's replacement, well, what can I say about that but...your choice there is very bold."

Maria nods, "We need to get going."

"Yes." With Box shutting off his lights from the desk, he says, "Thank you for keeping Kip out of sight in plain sight but, truth be told, when this is over we may...want him back."

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