KILLING TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

He told me his name was Bronson Grobbelaar.

He was tall with a shock of blond hair and probably about half my age. But, despite his youth, his face wore a worried expression and the shadows beneath his eyes told of sleepless nights.

I led him into the room reserved for Nemo Investigations and gave him a seat overlooking the bay. The whitecaps far below my apartment block and the slap of blinds confirmed another windy day in Port Elizabeth. Like Chicago, PE's a windy city.

'Ach, your security's tight, Mr. Nemo. Guy on reception wanted proof of ID before he'd let me up.'

'Call me Sol,' I said. 'In my line of work, I have to watch my back.'

'I suppose that explains the pistol.'

I followed Grobbelaar's gaze to the table where the component parts of my back-up gun, a Beretta, were laid out on cheesecloth. 'Guess so,' I said with a smile. 'It pays to keep sharp, but the cleaning's a pain in the ass.' I turned back to him. 'How can I help?'

A reminder as to why he was there made Grobbelaar writhe in his seat. Without warning, he began to weep. Tears coursed down his pallid cheeks. The reason for them was a mystery but I could empathise with the mindset that might cause such an emotional response.

'Must I get you a drink?' I ventured.

Grobbelaar lifted his wet face. 'Y-You're very kind. Whatever you have would be great.'

I nodded and crossed to the kitchen, returning with a can of cream soda. My visitor took a long gulp.

'Better?' I asked after a moment or two.

Grobbelaar straightened up, produced a tissue from his shorts pocket and blew his nose. 'Much,' he said.

I steepled brown fingers and gently asked again how I could assist.

'The thing is…,'my visitor began, before his voice gave out. 'The thing is… There are pictures…Pictures of me… Intimate pictures… You know what I mean. Stuff I'm ashamed… If they fell into the wrong hands…' The words spilled out of him, and he gasped like someone had punched him in the stomach.

‘Who’s got them?’ I asked.

‘T-This woman I met at a party. Afterwards, we were f-fooling around and…’

‘How much does she want?’ I interrupted.

‘50,000 bucks.’

‘That’s a lot of money.’

Grobbelaar nodded. ‘I’m just a chef at the waterfront. I don’t have the cash. Maybe I could raise ten grand but that’d be a stretch.’

‘Pay up without getting everything back,’ I said flatly, ‘and you’ll be on a treadmill you can’t get off. What happens if you don’t come through?’

‘I’ll lose my job for a start.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure,’ said Grobbelaar bitterly. ‘My employers are good people but they’re not exactly progressive. They’ve strong opinions about personal conduct and all that.’

‘Uh-huh. What do you want from me?’

‘I thought maybe you could help. Make her go away and leave me alone.’

‘SAPS would be better placed to do that.’

‘The police? -Would they even be interested?

‘Blackmail’s a criminal offence,’ I said. ‘Have you any proof? Text, voice, email?’

‘No,’ said Grobbelaar shaking his head sadly. ‘She’s been too clever to incriminate herself.’ With that, and the realization our discussion was going nowhere, his face crumpled.

‘Maybe I can talk to her and work something out,’ I suggested.

‘Would you do that for me?’ exclaimed Grobbelaar. ‘If you could…I mean that would be brilliant.’

‘No promises, but I can try.’

We parted shortly after. Grobbelaar left me the woman’s name and contact details. I said I’d ring her later and call him afterwards.

In response, my new client was effusive in his thanks and, having used the bathroom, left clutching what was left of his drink.

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Grobbelaar's nemesis went by the name of Ariadne Steinberg. I tried to reach her that night by phone but was only able to leave a message and send a text. There was no response that day or the next. I was about to convey this to my client, but he beat me to it.

The strain in Grobbelaar's voice was obvious as soon as I answered the phone. 'What's happening, bro?' he complained. 'I thought you were going to come through for me. Bitch is chasing me real hard.'

'I've tried-'

'That's not true! She says she doesn't know you from Adam.'

'I can assure you-' I started to say.

But Grobbelaar wasn't listening. 'You've done nothing for me!' he shouted. 'Nothing at all!' Strained beyond endurance, his composure collapsed, and I heard wracking sobs. I listened and waited for him to recover at least part of his wits.

When he did, I made a suggestion. 'Look, I could try visiting. Maybe the direct approach will work.'

At that, the sobbing ceased at once. 'W-Would you do that for me?' Grobbelaar asked.

I said yes but there were no guarantees. Yet what was already in my mind was that I might be faced with paying his blackmailer off.

Why would I agree to that on so slight an acquaintance? -Well, I guess for the same reason that the cases I took rarely had prospects of financial reward. Fact was that people who sought my help had little or nothing and nowhere else to turn. I was the last pit stop before they might be faced with giving up and accepting whatever *kak* was about to be dumped on their heads from a great height.

Ergo, as far as Grobbelaar was concerned, I either got stuck in or stood clear. It was just a question of whether to trust my instincts. Generally, while I didn't always get it right, things usually played out as expected.

Perhaps you consider my philosophy naïve, but it was outweighed by the knowledge I had the means to underwrite my generosity. Ultimately, it was for

me a simple matter of trying to make a positive difference to someone else's life or, if you will, bringing a little sweetness and light into this vale of tears.

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Ariadne Steinberg lived a few kilometres west of PE in a new development called Egremont Court. It was a place the agents were marketing as a lifestyle choice for those searching for what was described as a unique village atmosphere. An apartment in this gated ghetto started at upwards of a million for a space the size of a kennel.

I arrived later than intended so it was already dark as I drove the Mustang through the main gate up close and personal behind a white Ford Ranger. Peeling off, I pulled into one of the visitor bays. Bags of cement and a stack of paving stones told me that completion of this paradise was still a way off. From the car it was but a short walk along a lit path with dwarf palms in terracotta pots to one of three accommodation blocks.

I operated the buzzer more than once for the Steinberg residence but there was no answer. Giving up, I jabbed the button for an adjacent apartment.

'I'm here for Ariadne in Number Three,' I said, 'I can't get a response. Can you buzz me in?'

A voice full of phlegm answered irritably, 'Why the hell don't the lady give you the code? -Just like the other guy.'

Ariadne Steinberg's apartment was upstairs on the first floor. In the outside corridor was a mural depicting St. Mark's Square. The Venetian sky was bluish grey and to my mind kinda threatening.

I pressed the bell twice before realizing the door wasn't flush. There was a gap a centimetre wide. Gently, I pushed with one finger. The space grew a bit, though the carpet resisted. Another push widened the space so I could peer inside. Halfway along a passage was a panel of light, as insubstantial as a ghost's smile.

Flattening myself against the mural, I stood there irresolute, the silence unnerving. More, I conjured up some unnamed menace. My palms began to sweat, and my body turned hot and sticky. I pulled out the Beretta and found a

pencil light. Then, both hands together, I moved off the wall, aligned gun and torch and switched on the beam.

Instantly, the light panel was gone, its place taken by a yellow reflection. It came from a steel mirror at the end of a hallway.

I stared at it, my ears straining. On mouse feet, I edged inside and moved along the passage. The source of the light panel was a gibbous moon shining in.

I pressed on, holding my breath.

The space at the end was a rectangular, living-cum-dining room with a couple of picture windows. I ran the pencil light over everything and discovered it had all been done out by stylists from the House of Bland.

Contradicting this impression though was the body in one corner. My light fell on jeaned legs and black, flat shoes. Further exploration, beyond an ottoman, revealed a woman lying prone. She'd been shot with a single bullet in the nape of the neck. One of her arms was bent behind her in a half-nelson. It was the means by which she'd been forced to her knees.

I bent down and reached for the hand in the small of her back. It was cold and the fingers stiff. My guess was she'd been dead half a day or more.

Less of a guess was I'd found Ariadne Steinberg.

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I called it in.

While I awaited the police, I went through the apartment, a piece of tissue wrapped round the fingers of my right hand.

The impression I had in the living room was apparent elsewhere: the place could be mistaken for a show flat, so insignificant was the personal stamp put upon it.

There were a few clothes hanging in a built-in closet; some items of make-up arranged on top of a dressing table; and a laptop bag on the floor by a bedside cabinet. I was tempted to open this but resisted. My relationship with SAPS has sometimes been complicated, even though I'd spent years working for Detective

Services. Given my history, I didn't want to be accused of screwing around with the evidence.

The tiny bathroom with its Cobra shower fittings yielded nothing of interest. Likewise, all I found in the kitchen were a few food items in a cupboard and fridge. Two opened cans of drink stood on the drainer next to dirty plates and some cutlery.

All in all, it seemed the place served no purpose other than as an occasional crash pad.

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SAPS eventually rocked up saying they had problems finding the address. There were two of them, a man and a woman. They verified my name and address and that I was a registered PI.

After that, I explained why I was there and about the body in the living room. Yes, somebody had been murdered. Yes, I deduced that because shooting yourself in the back of the neck struck me as a near anatomical impossibility. No, I hadn't touched anything and, no, that included the laptop bag.

Things then played out in the way with which I was so familiar. The difference was I was answering questions not posing them. These came thick and fast and afterwards I was left kicking my heels in the kitchen. Through its open door, I observed the comings and goings of the Crime Scene Manager and his staff plus all the paraphernalia that got walked in with them.

Later, I gave my fingerprints and agreed to be swabbed for DNA. Once that was done, they let me go, my personal bona fides having been underwritten after midnight by a former SAPS colleague.

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Given what had happened, I was kinda keen to renew my acquaintance with one Bronson Grobbelaar. Trying to contact him by phone though proved fruitless and why wasn't I surprised? -That left me having to seek him out which was going to take time because of the number of eateries at the waterfront. The

other problem was I no longer held a valid SA Police Service appointment card. That meant bluff had to be my passport.

But before I set out, I changed my rig. Out went the designer T shirt, shorts, shades and shoes and off came the bracelet from Cartier and my favourite Omega Seamaster with its orange bezel. I substituted old clothes and loafers and, because there was a chill wind off the sea, put on a light leather jacket, much cracked through age and wear. After that I was on my way, the Mustang left in the basement garage and my Fiesta the inconspicuous mode of transport.

People sometimes tell me I look like a policeman, so I held that front of mind. Not difficult really if you combine a serious expression with an authoritative tone of voice and body language that says I've got a lot of ground to cover so don't be wasting my time asking a lot of dumb-ass questions.

But, as it turned out, I spent the best part of a day trailing fruitlessly from one place to another and got nowhere. At that point, my inquiries were hijacked.

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The ambush occurred the following morning with a call on the internal phone. The time was 7.20 a.m. and I'd just taken a bite from a piece of French toast.

'Police,' I was informed in response to my question to Reception ten floors below.

'Who precisely?'

'Two guys by the names of…' There was a pause. '…Maduna and Singleton.'

'Ask for ID,' I retorted.

I heard the demand relayed followed by the sound of muttering. 'OK,' said the receptionist. 'That's a Colonel Maduna and a Sergeant Singleton.'

Colonels in SAPS are not, in my experience, routinely involved in murder investigations. The very best of them are trying to keep the show on the road as they balance conflicting priorities as regards equipment, personnel, training, operations, IT/systems etc. The worst of them have little time for this sort of *kak*

and would rather be brownnosing the influencers who have keys to the money bags. That way the possibility of acquiring a new BMW or Mercedes as personal transport can become a reality. It was all a question of greasing the right wheels, if you follow my direction of travel.

But, at least on first impressions, Maduna was one of the good guys. Heavy-set and ponderous he might have been, but his dark eyes were clear and bright and shrewd.

I took them into the room where I'd sat with Grobbelaar only days before. Maduna sat down but Singleton remained standing, a digital camera held in one bony hand.

The Colonel came straight to the point. 'I've some questions for you,' he said, having waved away my offer of refreshment. Me, I took another bite from the toast and drank the last of my iced coffee. 'First, take me through the events which led to your visit to Egremont Court.'

'I supplied all the details on the night.'

'Not in writing.'

'That's easily corrected.'

'Nothing you want to change then?'

'Should there be?'

The Colonel turned to Singleton. 'Show him,' he said.

The Sergeant stepped forward and placed the camera in front of me.

I glanced at it irritably, aware I might be missing something. Something that would leave me disadvantaged. 'What is this?'

'Look at the screen,' said Maduna patiently.

I lifted the camera because the screen was small. The picture showed two cans of drink on a kitchen top, a few centimetres apart.

'The can on the right has the prints of the murder victim,' said Maduna. 'That on the left has yours. Specifically, the thumb, index and middle fingers of your right hand.'

Dumbfounded, I looked up but, before I could say anything, the Colonel's voice broken in again. 'Scroll left,' he ordered.

I did and up came another image. This time it was of a dressing table with several items lying on it. I saw nothing of significance and said so.

'Open it up,' advised Singleton. With difficulty, I magnified the image. 'See the comb, do you?' he asked triumphantly.

I saw it was made of steel, was about 15 cms in length and had short teeth. 'What of it?' I asked with more bravado than I was feeling.

'Your prints are on it. Strands of hair look like yours so we reckon we can get a DNA match as well.' The Colonel's voice was dead pan.

My reaction was anything but. 'This is bullshit!' I exploded. 'I'd never been in the place before that night. Grobbelaar must have taken the stuff. Come to think of it, he took a can of drink with him when he left here. I guess he palmed the comb from my bathroom. I never thought much about it at the time, but I missed it that night and had to buy another.'

Maduna heard me out. 'The problem, Mr. Nemo, is we can't trace anyone by the name of Bronson Grobbelaar. Our enquiries continue, of course, but so far, we've come up empty. In fact, we only have your word that someone by that name ever existed.'

'But-'

'One other thing,' he interrupted. 'We don't yet have a ballistics report but what's clear is the murder victim was shot with a small calibre weapon. Your Beretta's a 22 and was retained for examination. The incident report tells me it had been recently fired. On that basis, I can't discount the possibility it could be the murder weapon.'

I heard all this in a state of mounting panic as my breathing turned ragged. I closed my eyes and fought for control. With an effort, I found some words. 'Aren't… you…Aren't you forgetting something?' I said, my mouth as dry as a summer gulch. 'W-What reason could I possibly have for reporting a murder I'd committed myself?'

The Colonel sat up and stared me out. 'I've been doing this job for over 30 years,' he said. 'Can't say it happens often, but I recall occasions where a perp's called in his own crime. Counter-intuitive, isn't it? I remember one time though it

blind-sided us for weeks.' Maduna regarded me unblinkingly. 'In your shoes,' he went on, 'smart guy like you with the bucks to pay for it ought to be finding himself a lawyer. This isn't going away. Ariadne Steinberg was Hawks UC. You understand what I mean?'

I understood. The Hawks, or Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, has been likened to the FBI in the States or the NCA in the UK. It targets organized/economic crime, corruption and other serious criminal matters on referral. The Colonel's involvement in the case suddenly became clear. 'Under cover concerning what?' I asked.

Maduna tapped the side of his nose. 'Ours to know,' he said. 'Isn't that right, Sergeant?'

'Indeed, it is, sir.'

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I took the Colonel's advice and hired one of those fancy-pants, criminal lawyer firms operating out of Jo'burg. The lip they assigned me wanted a six-figure retainer before breaking wind and after that he spent the rest of the money keeping me out of jail. He did this by pulling holes in the police case, ballistics and path reports both being outstanding, and agreeing bail in my own recognizance for a sum of money that made my eyes water.

In due course, the ballistics report came back negative as far as my Beretta was concerned. Unfortunately, that simply led for a while to a suggestion I might have used another gun. Only this didn't stack with the facts. I had another registered piece, but it was a Glock using 9 mm ammo.

The pathologist submitted a report late as she was short-staffed on account of a colleague being away in Pretoria. It was her expert opinion the murdered woman had met her death 12-18 hours before I'd called in the crime. This wasn't conclusive as regards my innocence, but it was another step in the right direction.

The clincher though was the CCTV footage from the entrance to Egremont Court. A mix-up regarding dates led to the wrong film being initially examined. When they found the right footage, two points emerged. The first was

that I'd been caught on camera at 8.17 p.m. on the night in question for a period of 93 seconds as I entered the apartment block, in other words many hours after Ariadne Steinberg had met her death, and secondly the footage from the early morning revealed a figure who immediately aroused suspicion. He'd been wearing a jacket zipped up to his neck and a baseball cap with the brim turned well down. In one hand, he carried a small holdall and had been at pains to keep his face concealed. His visit was timed at 6.53 a.m., and he'd left nine minutes later. This was more than enough time for him to have made his way up to the apartment, overpowered and murdered his victim, planted evidence to incriminate me, and made his escape.

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Extricating myself from the net cast by the police took time. Time which was lost in my quest to find Bronson Grobbelaar.

In the event though, it made no difference to anything. What my erstwhile client had told me about his employment at the waterfront was one more lie to be added to the tally already standing against his name. In fact, he'd left his job weeks before approaching me.

Eventually, I tracked him down by activating the network of contacts I have across the City. These are my eyes and ears in all the public places where cash-in hand car park attendants, security guards, cleaning staff and the like are to be found. I pay a small daily retainer to everyone on my list and a finder's fee for a successful outcome. On this occasion, it took me four days before I got a result.

It turned out that Grobbelaar was working at a diner well away from the waterfront. It was popular with customers prepared to pay for food but allowed to bring their own drink. On the night I went, it was evident their offer was a winner because the place was packed tighter than a shoal of herring. The long wooden tables and benches laid out in parallel lines were overrun with hungry patrons.

I deliberately arrived late clutching a pack of Windhoek lager and found a perch at the end of one of the tables. A family of five was close by but they were finishing up and soon departed.

In due course, I gave my order to a distracted girl with blond hair wearing a long-sleeved blouse.

Service was unhurried and, when my food arrived, I slowly ate fried chicken with butternut squash and creamed spinach. I followed this with a leisurely dessert and coffee.

I made my move as the last customers were leaving. There was a glass counter at the rear displaying cakes and pastries. I approached and flashed a smile at a guy stacking crockery. 'Hi,' I said. 'What time does Bronson finish up?'

'You know each other?'

'We do.' I flashed another pearly special. 'We got acquainted when he worked at the waterfront. By the way, you must tell him his food is excellent. Really first class.'

'He'll be pleased to hear that.' The guy glanced up at the wall clock. 'Give him a half hour and he'll be through. You want me to tell him you're here?'

'That'd be good.'

Grobbelaar had only two routes to exit the place. The first was to come out front passing close by my table and the other was out of the kitchen back door. And that was within my eye-line when I inclined my head.

I waited only minutes before my quarry exited the rear door and hurried under a pool of light cast by an overhead lamp. He had his head down but it was impossible to miss Grobbelaar's shock of blond hair. It was also impossible to miss the girl with him who I recognized as the waitress who'd served me.

I got up and followed them as they made for an old VW Jetta parked in one corner. I hailed them as the car's doors unlocked. As one they turned to confront me.

'H-How did you find me?' asked Grobbelaar when I was up close enough to steal his air.

'Same way I find most people,' I snarled. 'Knock on enough doors and something usually drops. In this case-'

'I-Is this the guy you told me about, Bron?' interrupted the girl, her voice high-pitched and scared.

‘Yeah, I’m the guy,’ I cut in turning to face her. ‘The poor sap who your boyfriend here tried to frame for a murder he didn’t commit.’ I stopped, struggling to keep calm, my fists clenching and unclenching. ‘What I want to know,’ I hissed, ‘is the fuck why. And after he’s told me, I’m gonna turn his sorry ass over to the police.’

‘Angie’s not my girlfriend,’ Grobbelaar declared flatly. ‘She’s my kid sister.’

‘Changes nothing,’ I snapped. ‘I still want an explanation.’

‘Changes everything,’ retorted Grobbelaar with more asperity than I thought he possessed.

I gave him a hard look. It seemed I could either lose it completely or listen up: I chose the latter.

The story he told me was simple enough. He owed money to a party in Cape Town. How the debt had been incurred hardly mattered. The fact was he couldn’t pay so the creditor sold the debt on to a party who could bring greater leverage to the situation. Unhappily for me, it was acquired by a member of the cartel whose boss I’d killed the year before. Coincidentally, this criminal outfit was under investigation by the Hawks but one of their undercover operatives, Ariadne Steinberg, had been betrayed. The common denominator in all this was Port Elizabeth where she was temporarily based and where I lived. Putting these elements together was the work of an evil mind attuned to an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

By his own account, none of this had been explained to Grobbelaar. He’d been told no more than that he should approach me to help him and, having spun me the story he was given, should take items with my fingerprints on. Once he’d obtained them, he was to hand them over and that act would release him from any further obligation regarding the debt he owed.

‘I swear they didn’t tell me what they were planning,’ said Grobbelaar, after I explained who Ariadne Steinberg was and that she’d been murdered. ‘You have to believe me.’

‘I don’t have to believe anything,’ I said. ‘What I don’t understand is why go to all this trouble. If they wanted me out of the way, it’d have been easier to take out a contract.’

Grobbelaar hesitated. ‘They didn’t tell me they were going to kill anyone,’ he said, ‘but they boasted they wanted to make you suffer. Have you arrested for something and investigated with a lot of publicity. See you jailed awaiting trial and know that someone at some point might stick a knife in you. And you wouldn’t know when, so you’d have to live with the fear. Ex-cops in prison aren’t popular.’

‘So, you knew what was planned would be bad?’ I snapped.

I wasn’t able to see Grobbelaar’s face distinctly, but I heard the emotion that overwhelmed him. ‘I-I had no choice,’ he said brokenly, ‘because…’

‘…because of me,’ Angie broke in. ‘Before they got to Bron, they grabbed me. I was held to make sure he cooperated. If you don’t believe me, look at this.’ She drew back the long sleeve of her blouse and Grobbelaar shone a light from his cell onto her wrist. I saw a wide bandage, blood-stained in places as she rotated her arm. ‘They handcuffed me to a radiator, but the bracelet was too tight. It broke the skin and became infected.’

‘And that wasn’t the end of it,’ continued Grobbelaar in choked tones. ‘After I gave them what they wanted, they said they’d let Angie go but first she’d have to be nice. You know to the two scumbags who’d been minding her.’

I let my brain process all this and, as the seconds stacked up, the silence between us grew large. It persisted until the distant roar of a motorcycle broke the spell.

Abruptly, I came to a decision. ‘Take my advice,’ I began, ‘and get out of PE. If you’re smart, you’ll leave at once. Understand that the Hawks aren’t going to let this pass. But right now, I don’t think you’re the focus and let’s hope it stays that way. They want the trigger man, but if they don’t find him, they might backtrack and come looking for you.’

I’d said my piece and made to go, but Grobbelaar’s voice turned me back. ‘What about you?’ he asked.

‘What about me?’

‘I mean what’s going to happen to you?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘I really don’t. What I do know is tomorrow’s promised to no one. Sure, I’ll watch my back like I always do but this isn’t ever about living or dying and trying to calculate the odds one way or the other. All I have to figure is whether I’m doing right or wrong by my own lights. And that’s my call and it always will be.’

What they took from that, I have no idea because they didn’t say anything and for that I was relieved.

It was then I left them, she with her arms wrapped round her brother’s waist and he gently stroking her hair.

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