

RICK RESTAINO

THE LONE WOLVES

'I SWEAR, THIS better be good,' said Bill Hothri. Short and stocky, he stood with his arms folded. Bill was a ladies man who took pride in his looks; and had the attention span of a goldfish. Bill was pretty ugly, in all fairness, but had a lot of confidence that made him enticing to the opposite sex. He'd been bullied most of his life so that might explain it.

'That's what *she* said,' Dan Farfala said, with a grin on his face before turning to Bill. Dan had a history of felonies and spent three years in juvenile detention before getting his shit together; and narrowly graduating high school. He's been a law abiding citizen ever since but can get a little nasty due to his bipolar disorder.

Bill and Dan looked at each other and chuckled. Chuck Fairfield looked at them, rolled his eyes and scoffed. 'How original, guys. Of course it will be. It's supposed to be the best psychological thriller since *Seven*. No more needs to be said.' Chuck was a film buff who aspired to be a director, while studying Communication Studies at La Trobe. He had been in a four-year relationship until it ended last week after he chose his career over love; or so he told her. The real reason was because the relationship was just based on sex and he was starting to feel like a poor whore.

'Wait, is this one of those movies that makes you feel your brain has been fucked by an invisible dick by the end of it?' Dan said, raising an eyebrow.

'Yep. Sure is. At least it's original, unlike *Avatar*,' Chuck said, adding a sarcastic emphasis and turning to Bill.

'The *South Park* episode pretty much summed it up,' said Dan.

'Shut the fuck up, *Avatar* was great, you guys! Its effects were awesome, the story and characters were good and—'

'That's how every fan sums it up: effects, effects and Sam Worthington. In actuality, it was *Dances with Wolves* in space with explosions and giant Smurfs

with Disney cartoon eyes. The innovative special effects just overshadowed the film's flaws and tired manipulative audience-will-feel-how-I-want-them-to-feel techniques. Keanu Reeves is twice the actor of 'Aussie Sam' and that's saying a lot. Jim Cameron should be a fucking door-to-door salesman.'

'Pft, whatever, man. You're the only one that hates it; and that's saying something!'

Dan turned around. There was a long line of people behind them. Some of them grinned while most had their eyebrows risen, shaking their heads in disgust. 'Let's try not to make a scene. Come on, there's a booth available.' He nudged them forward.

'Bag *Avatar* again and I'll smash you.'

Chuck sniggered, 'I'd tap Lady Smurf over Neytiri any day.'

'Gee these chairs are shit. And it doesn't help when you can't stretch your legs cos of two people sitting in front of you that need to get a room,' Chuck whispered to Dan. They were sitting the middle of the penultimate aisle of the cinema. The smell of popcorn was hovering in the air and the constant sound of chewing and rustling could be heard from every corner. It was dark but the screen, emitting moving images of ads, shone on the couple so the silhouette of kissing and hugging was clearly visible.

'Free porn. Don't even have to stream it, it's live,' Bill said, laughing with a hint of mischief.

'I'll be right back, guys. Gotta piss,' Chuck said while standing up.

'Okay. Oh, my God! I fucking love this ad!' said Dan. 'Move the fuck out of the way, Chuck!' Dan pushed Chuck so hard that he almost fell face first onto the sticky aisle. People sitting in front, including the exhibitionist couple, turned to Dan. Groans and some laughter were heard.

Chuck shook the last drops of piss, tucked his dick back into his underwear and zipped up. The bathroom was deserted and had that notorious constant smell of . . . well piss. He headed towards the sinks in front of a long mirror that stretched all the way across the wall. Chuck pushed on the soap dispenser three times and turned the tap. A cubical door creaked open behind him. Chuck looked in the mirror, whilst rinsing his hands, and saw a tall man walk out; wearing a long beige coat, fedora, grey slacks and black boots. His slow

footsteps echoed throughout the bathroom. Chuck couldn't make out the man's face because the collar of the coat was turned up.

It's a little warm to be wearing all of that, thought Chuck.

The man approached the sink and just stood there, facing the mirror. Chuck turned off the tap and headed to the hand dryer, adjacent to the cubicles. He heard footsteps behind him. Chuck stopped and turned around to the man towering above him. The man's gloved hands rose to his collar and pulled it down. A shiver ran down Chuck's spine and his wet hands trembled. His knees felt weak; like they were on the verge of buckling backwards.

'Its not that warm,' the man said with a high and nasally voice. His face, set on a love heart shaped head, was clear as day. Greyish blue skin, shiny, like chrome; two enormous eyes, black and deep like twin bottomless pits; two sets of gills on the sides of a twig-thick neck and a thin line that was underneath two reptilian nostrils. Chuck felt the vibration of his teeth chattering, like a jackhammer in his mouth. A sudden sensation of lethargy hit him. The lights in the bathroom were brightening in unison until the only thing he could see was white light. Chuck's eyes closed and he fell backward onto the ground.

'Oh . . . what the hell happened?' Chuck said weakly. His head felt like it had been cut open, had a dozen razors thrown in and shaken for hours. He reached for the hand dryer, directly above him, and used it to aid himself up. As he stood on his feet, he grimaced in pain and placed one hand on his head and the other on the arch of his back. 'Fuck . . . oh, man.' Chuck stumbled to the bathroom mirror—his face was pale, his eyes bloodshot and there was dry blood on his nostrils. In a sheer flash of terror, the memory of the alien face came back to him; those soulless eyes, that pearlescent skin and the simple words he muttered: 'It's not that warm.'

With a rush of urgency, Chuck ran out the bathroom.

The corridors of the cinemas were completely empty. The only signs of life were the spilt popcorn, candy bar wrappers and . . . clothes. 'What the hell happened here?' Chuck looked around helplessly, hoping for a familiar human figure or voice to reassure him he was not in a dream and that he'd wake up any minute. Cinema 9; Dan and Bill are there!

Chuck rushed to the cinema which was only a few feet away from the bathroom, just how he had remembered it. The door was open and he stepped inside. The screen was white and the projector was still running. A repetitive clicking sound was coming from the top of the cinema.

Nobody's here. It's completely empty—no, is that who I think? There were two heads in two seats; one was leaning on the other. As Chuck approached the aisle, he heard low heavy breathing. Even though the present situation was bleak and disturbing, he had to smile. Bill and Dan were sleeping; Bill was slouched—with a hand deep in his pants—on Dan, who had his neck resting on the top of the chair with his mouth wide open.

'Oi, guys! Guys!'

Nothing. Just snoring.

Chuck grabbed both their heads, parted them slightly and slammed them together. Instantly, there was a reaction of groaning and profanity.

'Arggh! My head! Fuck!' said Bill, rubbing his head and opening his eyes.

'Pwoar! Oh, man, that caned.' Dan held his face in his hands, looked up at Chuck, bit his lip and inhaled sharply.

'Get up; we gotta get the holy Hell out of here!'

'Whoa, whoa. What's the rush, man? Geez.' Dan said, scratching his head.

'No time to discuss this, let's just go, please!'

'The movie wasn't as brilliant as what you thought it would be, hey?'

'No time to debate. Come on, guys, this is fucking serious. We have to get out of here or else we're dead!'

'Great movie that was, hey, Dan?' Bill said, grinning and nudging Dan.

'Yeah sure was. It was so great that someone spent the entire time on the can instead of watching it!' Dan said, chuckling before yawning.

They were going down the escalator of Village in Crown Casino. Chuck jumped off the last four steps and turned around to face them.

'You guys think this is all a big fucking joke? I don't know whether it's just your low IQs, or your sleep deprived state, but look around and tell me: what is wrong with this picture?'

Bill squinted, looking around sarcastically. Dan stared at the same place in front of him for a minute.

'The . . . ah, janitors of Crown are doing a pretty shit job of keeping this joint clean?' Bill said, shrugging his shoulders.

'Crown's closed and . . . they locked us in?'

'Oh, yeah, Crown's closed at fucking—,' Chuck looked at his watch, 'ten past four in the afternoon. And maybe you're right, Bill. Crown's janitors are doing a shit job because they aren't here at all! Nobody is! It's just us!'

Bill and Dan stared at Chuck with their mouths open before turning to each other.

'Do you know what this means, fuck face?' said Bill, starting to smile.

'Yes, I do, pussy breath. It means that we are the rulers of Crown!' Dan hugged Bill and they jumped around.

'I'm gonna trash the food court and sleep in the room Tiger Woods stayed in!' Dan said, with an ear-to-ear grin.

'Ha ha, that's great! Well I'm gonna hit the tables and—'

'Enough! Enough! Please! Guys, you leave me no choice. You wanna know the reason why I didn't come back from the bathroom? Well, I'm washing my hands and . . . this guy, at least I think he was a guy, comes out and he is wearing this big jacket, hat and slacks. I think to myself, "Geez, it's a little too warm for him to be wearing all that." The collar of the jacket is covering his face, so I can't see what he looks like. Anyway, I finish washing my hands and just before I have a chance to dry them, I turn around and he's right behind me. So, uh . . . he tells me, "It's not that warm." And he lowers his collar and I see this ugly, blue, greyish looking alien with great big eyes and big head and the next thing I know, I pass out.'

'An alien? You sure, man?' said Dan, squinting at Chuck.

'I'm positive it was a creature from another planet.'

'You know, it could've been a woman with a personality that you saw; they're creatures from other planets,' Bill laughed hysterically.

'Hey, Hothri, shut up. Chuck is probably right. I mean, seriously, as much as I want to believe Crown accidentally locked three people inside, I don't buy it. Fuck . . . just when I thought we had this whole place to ourselves.' Tears billowed in the corner of Dan's eyes.

'Dan, ease up! Technically, we do. But . . . I think the most important thing right now is to see what's going on outside and if there's anyone else around.'

'Yeah, maybe there's some lonely ladies that need some loving,' Bill said, hurriedly walking away.

Dan wiped some tears from his eyes. 'Hold up, Mr I'll-fuck-anything-that-moves-with-a-hole. Chuck . . . if that thing you say is real, what could it want?'

Chuck raised his eyebrows. 'I don't know . . . but I think the answer to that question is a terrifying one.'

'Not a soul in sight,' said Chuck, standing in the middle of Clarendon Street, looking around at the Exhibition Centre and down the road towards Spencer Street. There were at least fifteen cars in the middle of the road, most with two doors opened accompanied by skid trails behind. Trash scattered the foot paths and there was an aroma of burnt wood in the air. Across the road from the Casino entrance was a tram with all its doors opened.

'You got that right,' said Dan, walking over to Chuck.

'Guys, check your phones,' said Bill, reaching into his pocket.

'Shit, I must've been out cold four hours.' Chuck's phone screen had 29 MISSED CALLS; 19 NEW MESSAGES written on it.

'Jesus, my parents called me liked fifty times. How boring must that movie have been for me not to have felt my phone going off!' Bill and Chuck watched as Dan stormed to the footpath, near where Bill was standing, grabbed a bin out of its holster, and threw it at a car's windshield, destroying it to pieces. Dan's face was red and he panted, fell to his knees and sobbed. Chuck and Bill looked at each other. Chuck walked towards Dan. Bill saw this and did the same. Chuck sat next to Dan and placed his hand on his shoulder; Bill sat in front of them.

'We both know what you're thinking, there's no need for you to say anything. We are all alone, in this city, our family, friends gone and—'

Dan looked up at Chuck, his face still red, saturated with tears, eyes shiny and bloodshot. 'How the fuck do you know that, huh! For all we know, they could be out there somewhere.'

'Dan . . . they might be. But . . . they probably aren't. You can try ringing them to be sure, but look at these streets—they're empty,' said Bill, looking down at the asphalt.

'Bill's right. Another thing is, if it is just us, we have to stick together and stay on the same wavelength. Vandalising property isn't going to make things better. We can't afford to have any episodic catharses. I mean . . . think about what we've got here: an entire city to ourselves. We can ride trams down Swanston Street, play kick-to-kick at the 'G—'

'Jerk off in front of Parliament.'

Chuck looked at Bill and smiled before looking back at Dan. 'Exactly.'

Dan chuckled, sniffed and rose up. 'You guys are right. This city is our playground. Now, let's go and have some fun, fuckers!'

They ran to the empty tram.