



The Sicilian Job

Chapter One

That was the week that was

At 18:15 on a Friday evening, Memphis 'Telephone' Bell sat alone in his office contemplating a flying pig. Even by the exacting standards set by Texan American Telecom (TAT) it had been a particularly gruelling week and he felt the need for a moment of solace and reflection. Apart from his long-serving and long-suffering PA Josie 'Calamity' James and a few members of the IT team, who apparently economised on accommodation expenses by living in the office, the place was empty which suited Memphis' need for tranquillity just fine. Led by Charity Beaver the Marketing team had long since abandoned the workplace in favour of 'The Sozzled Hog', the local tavern where he was told they did their best creative thinking. Where they did their best drinking more likely retorted Memphis. Shortly after Charity's merry marketeers had led the vanguard, nearly all of TAT's other employees followed suit to impassioned cries of 'TGIF'. Had he wished, he could have fired a cannon down the office's main thoroughfare without endangering human life. Then again, firing a canon didn't accord well with his desire for peace, quiet and introspection. Instead of unleashing an artillery fusillade he needed to ponder the week that he had just experienced.

Mondays were always hectic with the executive team 'kick off' meeting, the weekly report to his American bosses and the Board, one-to-one meetings with his remotely based executives and cash flow, switched traffic data, billing data and fraud reports to be reviewed. But this past Monday's frantic routine had been enlivened, definitely a tastelessly chosen word he mentally chastised himself, by a jumper. Not a jumper in the form of a garish Christmas sweater with a festive jolly Santa or reindeer motif but a jumper in the form of a suicidal human being plummeting past the office windows onto the exit ramp of the parking lot eight stories below. For someone hell bent on self-annihilation the woman had chosen wisely and jumped head first thereby giving her about a five percent chance of failure. Failure, in this instance, being survival. Morticia Mordant, as she had been known to her Goth associates, had been addicted to meth, earned a crust as a 'sex worker' and had recently learned that she was HIV positive. Enough was enough she decided, it was time to make her mark on the world which she duly did last Monday.

Literally considerate to the last Morticia had timed her swan dive to oblivion for mid-afternoon, the parking lot's least busy period, so as not to inconvenience too many departing shoppers or office workers heading homeward at the end of their shift. However, Felicity 'Grim' Reaper, one of Memphis' Human Resources team, had the misfortune to witness Morticia's fall from grace. Her eye caught by the unexpected motion of Morticia's flailing legs unwittingly drew her to the window to catch her headlong Althusserian collision between the abstract and the concrete. Felicity found the spectacle so traumatic that her own human resources deserted her and she had to be taken home suffering from shock. It had been an impactful start to the week.

Tuesday offered little in the way of respite. It was late morning when matters began to unravel. Memphis habitually delved into every aspect of TAT's operations in an attempt to remain on top of the complex business and identify areas amenable to process improvements and innovation. Despite his diligence every so often something would pop out of left field and surprise him. Today was to be one of those days. He was well-caffeinated, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and believed that he was capable of withstanding any brickbats that the business might care to fling his way when Ali Barber, the head of HR and Felicity Reaper's boss materialised in his doorway.

"Hi Ali" welcomed Memphis "take a pew" gesticulating toward the expensive leather couches and comfortable chairs that constituted his office's executive meeting space. Ali, an abbreviation of Alison, was a level-headed if unlikely departmental head as she lacked any qualifications or indeed any formal work experience in the field of HR. Instead her resume detailed copious expertise in the flaky field of ski instruction for it was on the piste of Jackson Hole, Wyoming that Ali had first encountered Mitchell and Skylar Diggins the husband and wife entrepreneurial team that had co-founded TAT along with Memphis' boss a decade earlier. It was during the course of tutoring the Diggins' progeny Wealthy and Gold on the most efficacious means of descending a snow-clad Alp at high velocity on two blades of graphite and carbon coated timber without ending up in traction that Mitchell and Skylar had somehow divined that Ali possessed the wherewithal to head up the HR function in the European subsidiary that they intended to incorporate later that year. Having subsequently met Wealthy and Gold at the European company's grand inauguration gala Memphis appreciated that Ali must possess the patience of several Saints and immense reserves of fortitude to have taught those spoiled brats anything and rather churlishly regretted her success at keeping them out of hospital. Despite her unorthodox career path and mode of appointment Memphis had been impressed by Ali's diligence and aptitude as she set about the task of studying for her Diploma in Human Resource management. He had also promised the Diggins that he would assist her development and when the company

founders have made a direct appointment it's never a good idea to allow the anointed one to fail.

Having seated herself on a couch and declined Memphis' offer of coffee Ali came straight to the point. "I'm afraid to say that we have a sensitive matter on our hands boss. We've had a complaint of sexual harassment, which is always serious and worrying, but this one's a bit unusual. One of our colleagues has formally complained about their line manager."

Memphis listened attentively as Ali laid out the basis of the complaint and the evidence offered in support of it. After advising Ali on how to proceed Memphis resumed his schedule until just after 14:00 GMT when staff would be arriving for work at the company's Texas Headquarters that overseas employees had dubbed 'The Mothership'. His boss, The Senior Vice President International, Silas Marshall was in the habit of taking business calls on a conference spider phone and as a garrulous man he'd often invite other members of the International team into his well-appointed office to "hang out", "shoot the shit" and otherwise share his bonhomie. Suspecting that he had an audience Memphis decided to dangle the bait. After updating Silas on rather mundane developments Memphis segued skilfully into the sexual harassment complaint.

"What happened Memphis? You got caught with your pants down again?" chortled Silas guffawing over his morning coffee.

"No boss my pants are definitely fully rigged" replied Memphis "This one's a bit different from the usual groper or disrespectful sexist remark. You see this entails allegations of possible sexual assault while travelling on company business. It appears that the complainant was told that new corporate economy measures on travel and subsistence expenses meant that hotel rooms had to be shared, which is of course a load of old bollocks. The complainant was told this lie by their Department Head." "Let me guess" interjected Silas "the boss got the girl a bit tipsy in the hotel bar and then takes her up to their shared room and has his wicked way with her while she's still a bit squiffy. Right?" "Erm no, not quite boss" Memphis responded "you see they must have made strange bedfellows as they are both men."

The distant explosion of spluttering, choking and the sound of coffee being regurgitated spontaneously from several incredulous mouths sounded like a dam bursting. Most male Texans conformed religiously to their macho cowboy stereotypes and religiously they were

predominantly god-fearing Southern Baptists. Almost to a man the male employees at the TAT Mothership reflected these tendencies. To them Ang Lee's critically-acclaimed movie 'Brokeback Mountain' was an evil work of subversive propagandised homosexual porn, not that any of them had seen it. Homophobia remained as solidly rooted in the Texan psyche as The Lone Star, pick-up trucks, longhorn cattle, steak, chilli, grits and the Alamo. Memphis had counted on this reaction.

"What???? Oh man that leaves a bad taste in mah mouth, no pun intended" groaned Silas. Around the table the spider phone's sensitive microphones faithfully transmitted the sounds of male buttocks wriggling uncomfortably on leather upholstery and denim trousered legs being rapidly crossed and uncrossed over four thousand miles away across the Atlantic.

"Just deal with it Memphis. Ah don't care to hear anymore about this perversion of The Good Lord's natural order." Dial tone buzzed in Memphis' ear as Silas had disconnected the call presumably to preach a sermon about European debauchery and immorality to his Baptist flock. The Rainbow Alliance was unlikely to make much headway across most of Texas.

The rest of Memphis' day was consumed by "just dealing with it." Memphis and Ali interviewed Jim Bear the IT Director and subject of the complaint. Jim not only admitted "being economical with the truth" to ensure that his employee shared a hotel bed but unfortunately managed to litter his account of events with a litany of sexual innuendo about "coming clean", "making a clean breast of it", "having a gay old time" and "not going off half-cocked". Despite his inadvisable foray into risqué territory Jim was still rational enough to understand the benefit in resigning his post, clearing his desk and leaving the office under a cloud rather than being fired and leaving the office unemployable. Having completed the formalities of accepting Jim's resignation Memphis left HR to conclude the process but also asked them to meet one-on-one with each member of the IT team to explain Jim's departure and learn what other potential exposures lurked amidst his former techies.

Typically, IT departments were supposed to be full of acne-spattered anti-social, anonymous geeks who are perpetually wired, connected and on-line. IT workers rejoiced in being nerds and conformed to corporate norms as respectfully as a group of Jihadists gate-crashing a bar mitzvah. Their managers usually possessed all the charisma of nondescript beige bureaucrats attending a conference on "Process Management challenges in Generally Agreed Accounting Principles" yet here at TAT they seemed to occupy a writhing sea of

ferment Jim being the third team leader that Memphis had cause to remove in the past two years. Something was clearly amiss. Memphis' dismal opinion of IT management was not enhanced when Ali reported back from the interviews with Jim's former employees where she had learned that their manager had routinely invited his team to late night drinking sessions at the bar of the nearby Comfort Inn where several were invited to "sleep it off" in the comfort of the large bedroom Jim had thoughtfully booked for the night. "What the fuck did IT stand for" pondered Memphis "Information Technology or Inherent Turpitude?" "OK Ali, start a search for a new moral titan with at least a passing familiarity with software development, systems integration and hardware to fill our recently discovered vacancy." Surely Wednesday would offer a welcome day of turgid, routine mind-numbing mediocrity to compensate for the exacting start to the week?

It was 02:11 Wednesday morning when Memphis' illusions and dreams were shattered by TAT's switch manager Iain 'Braveheart' Macbeth calling his mobile. "Eh, morning boss" croaked a voice enriched by a long-standing familiarity with single malts and tobacco. "Ah'm sorry to wake yer boss but some tosspot wi' a backhoes just severed our main interconnect with BT. They're doing emergency road repair on The Highway and that's where our T3 line runs, or used to run, to BT's Tower Gateway Exchange. We've got resiliency on the international circuits but I'm sorry to say that right now our customers in the South East of England can't reach us for domestic calls."

As his sleep-addled mind slowly began to function and Memphis convinced himself that he wasn't experiencing a nightmare, well he was but just not the kind one could awaken from. "OK Iain, really pile the pressure on BT to get it fixed and back into service ASAP. Let me know if you need me to call their senior management to exert influence otherwise I'll leave it to you. Right now, it's not a huge problem as there's little traffic except international calls to the Far East on net at this time of night but if this isn't fixed by 07:00 we've got a real problem. Keep me posted mate."

Needless to say, Memphis did not return to the sleep of the just. Abandoning hope of further rest, he headed for the office before 06:00, catching up with Iain en route. Predictably the news was not good. It was odd that whenever one of their competitors suffered an interconnect outage BT always took an eternity to restore service. Surely the fact that the competitor's traffic reverted to BT's network during the outage and was generating windfall revenue for them could have nothing to do with their tardiness mused Memphis sardonically. As TAT's UK call traffic was down over sixty per cent compared to the previous Wednesday, that afternoon's conference call with Silas and his entourage of

puritanical coffee fiends was an uncomfortable affair. This time, however, the buttock clenching and grinding occurred at the UK end of the call. During the remainder of the day and night Memphis' hopes again began to rise for a peaceable Thursday.

The morning began propitiously. Overnight BT had restored the interconnect and UK domestic traffic levels had been restored to normal. In fact, all was proceeding swimmingly until Prudence Juris TAT's European Regulatory and Legal Manager appeared at Memphis' door saying that their German lawyers Lügner, Klagen, Gauner, Diebe und Blut were on the phone and had urgently requested his presence on a conference call. "Let me guess" said Memphis ruefully "might it concern a Deutsche Telekom lawsuit?" "Amazing, three guesses and you get it first time" replied Prudence. "OK, ask Josie to set the call up in thirty minutes and in the meanwhile you can brief me on their latest bellyaching" said Memphis.

Deutsche Telekom (DTAG) was notoriously litigious with their competitive rivals. Their executive management survived from the days of State ownership of a monopolistic supplier and they simply loathed the notion that this was no longer the case. Nowadays they had to sully their hands with insignificant, whinging upstart competitors and, worse yet, many of them like TAT were foreign. Unlike the "good old days of the *Drittes Reich*", shooting foreigners, particularly Americans, was no longer encouraged as a national pastime. These days they had to be content with swaddling the enemy in litigation. The problem in this instance being that Americans are similarly litigious and delighted in not merely picking up DTAG's thrown gauntlet but, once retrieved, slapping them across the chops with it. Indeed, TAT's legal team almost appeared to relish goading the Germans into evermore complex, esoteric and expensive levels of legal dispute. Such was the case that Memphis had recent occasion to admonish his colleagues "Look guys getting your jollies is all very well and good, but remember that I'm the sucker that picks up the tab for your legal indulgencies. It's my bottom line that's paying for all this." Despite assurances of circumspection the evidence of eight active lawsuits with DTAG alone suggested that the ravening appetite for litigation remained unassuaged.

Prudence's briefing on the current issue immediately grasped Memphis' attention. TAT's primary methods of customer acquisition were cyber-marketing, price positioning and bulk mailers. Memphis' expertise in marketing meant that he involved himself intimately in all marketing activities. Their latest campaign in Germany was no exception. Actually, it had been Memphis' idea to use a primary colour similar, but not identical, to DTAG's distinctive Magenta that they used in all their visual corporate marketing and brand communications. Not identical because DTAG had taken the unusual step of registering RGB alias 255-0-144,

the code for the colour Magenta with the European Brands Office. Consequently, DTAG now believed that they owned the colour and enjoyed its exclusive use. Their lawyers believed that TAT had violated this sanctity with their recent marketing collateral and were threatening yet another lawsuit.

“Well they’re wrong” smirked Memphis “we’ll get our printers, website designers and marketing agency to testify that the colour isn’t Magenta. We’ll win and countersue for frivolous litigation and we’ll bloody well win that too” asserted Memphis his ardour for legal action growing impressively by the second. “I’m not so sure” cautioned Prudence prudently “If we prove that we haven’t violated their trademark, I speculate that they’ll simply re-file with a charge of ‘passing off’, in other words that we deliberately selected a colour ever so similar to Magenta, and they will contend that, because of that similarity, the general public would be duped into believing that the mailer emanated from DTAG, which was after all our intent. Remember the governing law is German, the case will be heard in Germany, by a German judge and the track record says that the decision will favour DTAG. “That’s outrageous” snorted Memphis “we’ll win the case and they’ll retaliate and win a secondary case just because they’re German? Well fuck them, we’ve got to do this. Anyway, morally, their action is completely unacceptable. Who do they think they are claiming that they own the entire bloody colour spectrum? Are we supposed to just use black and white in our advertising or do they own them too?”

And so it came to pass on the ensuing conference call that despite DTAG claiming damages of €600,000 for the reproduction and violation of “their” colour without express permission, that Memphis instructed counsel and TAT’s legal team to vigorously fight any litigation if and when DTAG filed suit knowing full-well that it would be “when” not ‘if’. On reporting the issue to Silas shortly afterward Memphis was met by a predictable wave of outraged Texan bombast “What the fuck Memphis? They no more own Magenta just because they use it in their advertising than I own Brown just because it’s the colour of my shit. Well it’s usually the colour of my shit unless I had lunch at Pepe’s Rib Shack but that’s another story” roared Silas. What the hell is their problem? Why in tarnation did we bother saving their pitiable asses after the War? Is this the thanks we get for the goddamn Marshall Plan?” gushed Silas unleashing a brisk salvo of unanswerable questions. Memphis allowed the tempest to blow itself out without reply. After discharging his statutory responsibility to report the impending litigation to a fellow Board member in The Mothership, Memphis made his weary way home. It had been yet another hellishly long and arduous day and he renewed his hopes for a day of respite on Friday.

Bright sunshine and birdsong augured well the following morning and Memphis felt positively peachy as he imbibed his first medicinal coffee of the day. TFIF he mused. The way this week had gone, God had nothing whatsoever to do with the turn of events – Thank Fuck It’s Friday. Amazingly the day proceeded with an almost serene tranquillity until he found himself contemplating that flying pig. The pig was no hallucination nor was it a flight of fancy. Over his desk a battery-powered pink plastic toy pig was describing a perfect arc in the office airspace above his head. This unorthodox executive toy was Memphis' pride and joy. Some years earlier Skylar Diggins had ribbed him that “pigs would fly when the European subsidiary turned a profit.” Despite what had seemed to be overwhelming obstacles, or opportunities as American management talk would have it, Memphis had navigated the business to a pre-tax profit by Year Two. Memphis' response was to descend to the Shopping Mall nine stories beneath his office, seek out a toyshop and purchase his flying pig. He attached its supporting wire to the ceiling tiles, activated its tiny motor, recorded its inaugural flight on his cellphone and mailed it to Skylar, Mitchell and Silas. Now he took delight in performing a porcine aerobatic display whenever American staff visited from The Mothership. Memphis had a well-earned reputation of being a tad eccentric.

Memphis' reverie was broken by Josie who had materialised unnoticed in the open doorway while his attention was fixated on the pig. “Excuse me Memphis but there’s a foreign gentleman by the name of Ricardo D’Agostino on the phone for you from Omertà Telecom. I’ve tried to convince him to call you back on Monday, as it’s quite late, but he’s insistent. Claims he knows you and that’s it’s an urgent matter.” Fleeting Memphis cast his mind back over the countless European telecommunications conferences and meetings that he’d attended on TAT’s behalf but drew a complete blank. “Sorry Josie I can’t recall either the guy's name or that of the company but I’ll take it anyway. Put him through and you’re quite right, it is getting late so get yourself off home and have a fun weekend.”

Feeling reinvigorated and focused after his flying pig therapy Memphis mentally prepared for his mystery call oblivious to the fact that his week from hell was about to tumble off the narrow spectrum of reality into a bottomless abyss.

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