

Crime and Management

by Katrina Watson

Runner-up: Body in the Library category

2024 Scarlet Stiletto Awards

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'I'm buzzing you in, boys,' I say in my huskiest tones, lips close to the intercom. I return to Marco's Italian import chairs, cross my legs, flick back my hair, wipe my tongue over my teeth. Cross my legs the other way, admire the sheen on the stockings as well as the Manolo Blahniks. Scarlet pumps, the stiletto heels of which are so high I've got real altitude. Mountaineers might call it the Death Zone.

Finally, I hold out my left hand, twisting this way and that, and admire that ring on the fourth finger. I'm ready to meet the boys. I hear the elevator humming, and then the doorbell rings.

Oh my God. Why did I bother? What a ramshackle pair. Marco didn't tell me he was running a lost dogs' home. I can see we need to make some changes here. Big changes. I stand up rather carefully – pencil skirts being unforgiving – and sow them into Marco's library.

‘Okay, boys, take a seat.’

Marco calls this room ‘the library’ on account of the one book on the middle shelf: *The Godfather* (abridged). The library is Marco’s favourite room for negotiation with his clients. I see some stains on the cream carpet and make a mental note to get the carpet cleaned. One of the downsides of negotiation.

Matter of fact, I think his library has acted as a short-term morgue from time to time. But those days are gone, what with Marco being locked away for ages. It’s going to be different from now on. No more negotiation, no physical persuasion, no ending up with stains or bodies in the library. It’s all contactless these days. Marco’s going to be in the pen for seven years non-parole and I have to manage this organisation. Everything’s changed and what hasn’t, has got to change. The boys are waiting for me to say something.

‘There should be three of you, right? Do a head count, for me, would you, Eric the Red?’ I point to the red-headed one who looks like a Viking. Huge. The other is almost as big but his head slopes backwards and his eyebrows nearly cover his eyes.

The Viking counts with his fingers, then goes: ‘Two – Link and me.’

Right. A Viking and a neanderthal called Link. I’m wondering what the third one will be. A Visigoth?

‘So, where’s number three?’ I ask.

The intercom buzzes again.

‘That’s him.’ Viking strides out into the foyer and presses the button.

‘Speak,’ he says.

See what I mean? Apparently this is the standard for external communication in this organisation.

‘It’s me.’ The voice sounds like a dying rat up a drainpipe.

‘Come in you fucker,’ Eric the Red says in a friendly tone.

After a minute or two, in walks a human rat, complete with snout and plaited tail down his back. What did I tell you? So now we’ve got a huge Viking with red hair, a huge neanderthal with no forehead and a rat with a tail. The full catastrophe.

‘Okay, you’re all here. Thank you for coming, boys. Marco’s told me all about you. You usually meet in the gym, right? Okay, we’ll go down there and do proper introductions and all.’

I’m watching my step. Power outfit on today – my red stilettos, looking so sexy with the black pencil skirt.

‘What do you think of Marco’s place?’ I make conversation as we go down. ‘I’ll be living here while Marco’s in the clink. I haven’t even found my way around yet but I know the fridge is full of beer. We stocked up before he was remanded.’

The boys look a bit happier. A big gym, lots of machines. Everything the male body could want. A shoulder machine, a thigh machine. A coffee machine.

‘Love a coffee. Anyone know how to work it?’ I look at the one with the eyebrows but no forehead.

‘Thank you. Linc isn’t it? As in Lincoln, I presume?’

‘As in Missing,’ he says.

I take another look at Link. ‘Okay.’

He asks me what sort of coffee.

‘I’ll have a macchiato, thanks Link.’ He looks baffled.

‘That means stained.’ They all stare at me.

‘Stained – you know, not clean.’ Clearly they didn’t know.

‘I used to be a squeaky-clean lawyer, and now I’m ever-so-slightly tarnished. That’s why I have a macchiato. Stained, get it?’ No, they didn’t. They’re all just sitting up like stunned mullets, staring at my tits.

‘Yoo-hoo,’ I call, and point to my cheeks. ‘This is my face. Up here.’ I sit down carefully on the chest fly machine. Cross my legs. They do look good, the legs.

‘So, everyone get comfortable,’ I say. The rat is on the lat pull-down and the Viking’s on a bench, gut hanging over his trackie daks. Link’s fussing with the frother.

‘Now you all know my name – Taylah. Taylah Taylor. And we all know Marco’s going to be in for a while. Seven years non-parole, even with good behaviour. Bit stiff. Marco actually did the world a favour getting rid of that piece of shit. Shoulda got the Clean-up Australia Award, for taking him out.’

The Viking and the Rat just look stunned. My guess is they’ve never taken orders from a woman in their lives. Well, change is good. Link’s got the steam thing working, I can hear.

‘C’mon boys. It’s not a funeral.’

‘There you go, one stain,’ says Link. He gives me a tiny coffee cup plus a particularly horrible expression which must be his smile, and which I could do without.

‘Grazie, Link,’ I say. He just stares down my cleavage. No idea.

I put the coffee on the weights for a moment and take the opportunity to turn my left hand this way and that. The diamond catches the light. Lucky I got my nails done before Marco’s trial, and the perfect colour too – Blood Red. Looked good on the telly, nails plus ring.

‘Like it?’ No response.

‘I don’t think I heard an answer. Like my ring?’

The Viking shambles over, gives me a kiss and peers down my top. Smells like a pub.

‘Congratulations, mate.’

He’s about seven feet tall, give or take, a disaster in grimy polo fleece and thongs. Toenails haven’t been cut in a while, probably too far away for him to see. The other two boys nod their heads. Just as well. Marco wouldn’t be happy to hear that they hadn’t admired my ring.

‘Marco went to a lot of trouble to get this for me,’ I say. ‘The jeweller let me choose anything in the shop. Marco persuaded him.’

The boys nod. They know what Marco’s persuading is like. I look at my ring again. Classy. Two carats of pink diamond.

‘I missed out on a nice box though. And a receipt.’

‘Always good if you want to resell, a box is,’ says Link.

‘That’s not very tactful, Link,’ I say. The boys laugh. Link looks confused. I decide I’ll have to scale back the vocab to Year Five level. ‘Tactful means noice. Not very noice.’

‘Now you know Marco’s asked me to run the show while he’s inside. Any issues with that? Good. Because Marco doesn’t want issues, and nor do I.’

‘But what you don’t know is this – what me and Marco want is change. Marco has decided to take my advice and embrace change. So, we are going to modernise this little outfit.’

Now they’re taking notice.

‘Corporate image for a start. The three of you look like a dog’s breakfast.’

They’re startled. Tug their shirts down. Link checks his fly. The other two don’t have flies. Instead they have little wet patches on the front of their trackies.

‘We’re going to have a makeover – a new image. Branding. So, when Marco’s released he’ll find a class act. Starting with a corporate style file. When you go out on a job I want you to look smart – like, like footy commentators. Or real estate agents. Little badge. Logo on the tie. Yep, I want you to be one notch above our clients. That way you make them feel inferior.’

Link’s looking puzzled again, so I add, ‘Inferior, means like shit. That is how we want them to feel – shit-scared.’ Link gets it now.

I’m thinking fitted royal blue suits, shortish pants above the ankle, short socks below the ankle and long pointy shoes. I’ll work on that a bit more. Might not be the right look for Viking. Probably look a bit weird on him.

‘Plus we’ve got to go contactless collections from now on, get it?’

‘But how do we beat the shit out of them contactless?’ says Widow.

‘That’s what we’re going to work out,’ I say. ‘Now let’s start with introductions. You can each tell me your name and your role in the organisation.’

Silence.

‘Okay, I’ll go first. You know I’m Taylah. Taylah Taylor. Criminal lawyer. Crims used to have gold chains round their necks, and now it’s lawyers. But Marco’s hit the jackpot.’ I laugh and recross my legs. ‘I’m his lawyer. Better than any gold chain, don’t you agree?’

They agreed. They were learning.

‘Okay, enough about me. Now Link, what’s your role?’

‘Kneecaps.’

‘Specialist in kneecaps?’

He looks like he’d keep the orthopaedic surgeons of Melbourne in business.

‘That sounds like you’re a- a – Compliance Consultant. I’ll get some business cards made for you, Link. Compliance Consultant, Patella Specialist.’

Link does something with his mouth. Possibly a smile.

‘And you?’

This bloke with the grey mullet and rat’s tails says, ‘They call me the Widow.’

‘Widow?’

‘As in Maker,’ he says. ‘Widow-Maker.’ The other two laugh.

‘You make widows?’

‘Yep,’ he says, ‘from scratch.’

‘The merry sort? Or the sad sort?’

‘The shit-scared sort.’

‘Well, Marco likes to see a widow, I know. A widow means the operation’s been a success. He likes to see them grieving – at least until the flowers are in the green bin.’

‘But those lilies last weeks,’ says Link. ‘That’s a long time to grieve.’

‘Yeah,’ says the Viking. ‘The grieving’s usually over when the corks are popped at the wake. We organise the end of the grieving period.’

‘Oh, and how do you do that?’ I ask.

‘One of us takes the widow into the bedroom.’ This was the Widow-Maker himself. I decide to call him Widow-Rat, in my mind anyway. The boys laugh.

‘What you might call a condolence fuck,’ says Widow-Rat. ‘Always makes the widow feel better, and it’s the official end of the mourning period.’ Hmm. I was learning too.

‘Okay. Well, your business cards will say Event and Recovery Manager.’ Widow-Rat looks charmed.

‘And you? Who are you?’ Eric the Red says, ‘They call me Feral.’

‘Ah, Feral, well, I won’t ask why, though I do know Marco calls you his Wild Man. I’m going to call you Viking. And get you some business cards too.’ He sighs, and a blissful expression comes over his face. Business cards. A dream come true.

‘And what should we put on the cards?’ I ask.

‘Billiard cues. By appointment.’

‘Right,’ I laugh. Viking gurgles.

‘So, my friends,’ I say, ‘Marco’s under new management and you’re under new management, and things are gonna change. I’ve come up with a few ideas and Marco will be giving us his thoughts too. Actually, he’s started a course, an on-line course while he’s in — paid for by the taxpayer.’

‘A course? On what?’

‘Management,’ I say. The response to this was a mixture of gagging gestures, coughs and vomiting sounds.

‘Go get yourselves a beer,’ I say.

* * *

There’s a drinks fridge down the back, which Marco’s told me about. He and the boys picked it up at a break-in, some warehouse in Epping. There was supposed to be a shitload of bikes in that warehouse, Marco said. Those Italian electric bikes, 10 grand each.

But when they got there the place was empty, except for a fridge. Full of beer and Red Bull it was. So they took it. Now Marco makes them pay for the drinks. ‘Honesty system,’ he says, then pisses himself laughing. That’s what he’s like.

While the boys are getting their beers I look around. Marco seems to have all the gym machines you’ve ever heard of; Lat Pull Down, Quads, Leg Press, you name it. Typical Taurus, Marco, he’s got to have it all. And he once told me that gym machines can kill two birds with one stone. An occasional person needs further convincing, and gym machines are quite good for that, Marco said. Someone trespassing on Marco’s territory for example. ‘That person needs a bit of education,’ Marco said. ‘It’s amazing what having weights dropped onto your hands can teach you about Geography.’

Marco even gets his boys to keep gym cards on some of his ‘clients’. His little joke. He’s got a great sense of humour, Marco has. I can just imagine.

‘Let’s see what you’re up to,’ he might say to some shivering heap, as he pulls out a card from the drawer labelled ‘Gym Circuits’. ‘Widow, ten kilograms today I think on that machine, just make sure that his hand is directly under the weights,’ Marco would be saying, as he strolls over, in his purple velour robe. ‘Please don’t scream,’ he’d be saying to the heap. ‘It hurts my ears, and we wouldn’t want to have to increase the weight further, would we Widow?’

Marco told me he gives the boys little presentations in the gym – topics like ‘Enforcement, Marco’s Method’ – usually while he’s on

the spin bike in all his gear. He likes to look the part, Marco does, so he wears the singlet with the number on it on the treadmill, then changes into the Lycra for the bike. Mauve’s his favourite Lycra colour. Possibly not the best choice, but I’ve never said that. But it’s the helmet that really cracks me up. Of course, I haven’t let Marco see me laughing but it was hard for me to keep a straight face when I heard about the aerodynamic helmet for the spin bike.

Anyway, I, Tayls, I’m in charge now. Temporarily of course, acting CEO, just for seven years. Should be enough time to get this lot up to scratch. And to get them to stop perving. It’s the sheer stockings with the pumps, I know. Viking is actually slobbering. He’d better not let Marco see that.

They’re back. God what a sight.

‘You know what, boys?’ I give them my trademark Taylah smile.

They go, ‘No, what?’

‘I’ve decided that you’re my Leadership Group.’

They’re impressed, I can tell. It doesn’t dawn on them there’s no-one to lead.

‘So, I want you to engage, to work with me and Marco. We’re going to update the organisation. Refresh, reframe, refocus. Yep, a professional outfit. New image, new branding, new logo. But, for a start, we’ve got to have values. That’s like – like reasons for being in our game. Now, I’ve got some suggestions from Marco somewhere here. Hand me that folder, please, Viking. Yep, that’s the one. ‘STRATEGIC PLANNING, Taylor-Pasquale Group.’

‘These are notes from Marco Pasquale, BMP, Bachelor of Management Pending. Marco’s been doing some homework. He gave me this at the contact visit, but he told me the screws would look at it, so he had to make up stuff.’ I flick my new extensions back over my shoulder. Admire that left hand again, just for a second.

‘Values – suggestions. So this is a list Marco’s put together for us to consider, boys. Honesty. Honesty, Marco? I can tell you now, that’s a joke. Justice. What! Marco, we all know there’s no such thing as justice. Why are you in the slammer? You wouldn’t be there if there was any justice.

Com-passion – sounds like a franger. I don’t know where he got this rubbish from. Must be trying to look good for the screws.

Nope, they’re no good, so what’ll our values be, boys? Any suggestions, or would that be hoping for too much?’

The three of them think for a bit, big strain. Then they pipe up, like the three monkeys.

‘Money,’ says the Viking. I go: ‘Good.’

‘Control,’ says Link. Perhaps he’s not as stupid as he looks. I go, ‘Very good.’

‘Fear,’ says Widow. ‘Yeah, great, Widow. Fear, excellent,’ say I.

‘That’ll do.’ Write them up on that whiteboard, Link.’ I assume he can write. Yes, he can. Lucky about that: ‘Munny, Cunt troll.’

‘Money, Control and ... what was the other one?’ Oh yeah, thanks, Widow. Fear, that’s it. Control. Fear. Marco’ll love those.’ I turn my left hand.

Link draws a dick and balls on the white board, then stands there, pleased with himself. ‘Link, sit down,’ I say. God, like kids. Into the modern era.

‘Now what about our Mission Statement?’

‘This is important – we’re bringing extortion ...’

‘What the fuck?’ says Widow-Rat. ‘Our Mission Statement?’

‘Yes,’ I go. ‘Our Mission Statement, and if you don’t like it, you can just piss off. Now.’

‘No, no, it’s cool,’ says Widow-Rat. Bit anxious now.

Link speaks. Not shy, Link. Bit of a suck. Anyway, he comes out with, ‘To rule Melbourne.’ The other boys look at Link and stick their fingers down their throats.

I, Taylah, Acting CEO, think. I decide. That actually covers it pretty well. Maybe not quite ambitious enough, but not bad. ‘Yep, that’s good, Link. Aspirational, I like it. To rule Melbourne. For a start, not bad at all.’

Link does his smile-attempt-thing. As I said, horrible.

‘So, for now, that means go and squeeze the money out of every client in town, just like usual, only I’m coming too. To learn about the business, bottom up.’

I stand up. ‘Stop staring at my bum, Viking. So where are we off to?’

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Link and Widow-Rat tell me that on a Saturday arvo they usually pay a visit to the Leprechaun Inn – Leper Colony they call it – arses with glasses. Craft beer with fucking stupid names, and all that artsy-fartsy crap. I tell them to remember our new corporate presentation.

The boys have hot wired a Nissan Patrol and drive up to this dark green pub. They park around the corner in the laneway, outside a Chinese in the No Standing. An Asian guy comes up at us brandishing a broom.

‘Wouldn’t mind a dimmie,’ says Widow-Rat.

‘Come on, Widow, we gotta do this quick,’ says Viking, ‘could be pigs all round here, cop shop’s just over there.’ He takes the broom out of the owner’s hand and sweeps him back into his shop. Well, sweep is one way of describing it.

We can hear music from the pub – Fleetwood Mac. That’d be right. I tell the boys to add that to the list of penalties due. The pub’s one of those cosy ones. Honour boards for the winners of the arm wrestle competitions back to 1900, that sort of thing. We discover Mein Host, Friar Tuck, as the boys fondly call him, carousing with his wanker University mates. Just as usual, apparently.

‘Afternoon, yer lousy piece of shit,’ Widow-Rat says, as he takes the top off the bottle of hand sanitiser and pours the entire contents over Friar Tuck’s head. ‘We’re here to collect some rent. Start a conversation, you might say. Implement a strategy.’

Widow-Rat’s catching on. Excellent.

Friar Tuck goes pale. ‘Oh no, not a strategy.’

‘We just want to make quite sure your objectives are aligned with ours,’ says Viking.

‘And that means we are interested in your operations space,’ say I, getting into the mood.

‘No, please spare me that. I left my job to get away from that management talk. I’ve gone clean, just tell me how much you want ...’

‘Well, since you ask,’ Widow-Rat says, grinning at me, ‘I think our objective would be, moving forward, about ten ...’ But before Widow-Rat gets the words ‘ten grand’ out, Friar Tuck moans, ‘Moving forward, oh no,’ and moves forward all right- faints into his glass he does. Beer and blood crafting its way all down his linen shirt onto the nice Baltic pine boards.

‘Tell you what,’ says Widow-Rat, ‘this is easier than smashing patrons with billiard cues. That’s how we used to extract ten big ones. Apparently all we have to do now is mention ‘key stakeholders’ and job’s done.’ But then we hear sirens over near the Carlton cop shop.

‘Shit, boss, better get out of here,’ says Viking.

* * *

The boys start to make a move, leaving me stuck on a bar stool in my skirt and heels. Viking, bless him, doubles back, and picks me up in one move, throwing me over his shoulder like a meat carcass. He takes massive strides through the bar and out the bottle shop entrance into the lane. I lose one stiletto just outside the Chinese, but Viking ignores my entreaties about the shoe and chucks me into the back of the Patrol. I duck down into the footwell, in amongst the screw drivers, wire and duct tape. Laddered the stockings unfortunately. So, back at Marco's, they come up to me for their share of the ten grand.

'Objectives achieved, boss?' one of them says.

'What was the outcome?' I ask breathily, wetting my lips with my tongue.

'Income,' they say, and piss themselves laughing.

'Evaluation?' I say, leaning forward, top gaping, skirt up.

'Class act,' they say. 'Pure fucking class.'

'Correct,' I say. 'But just go back and get my shoe, would you, one of you? My red shoe – on the footpath, outside the Chinese, and... (fluttering my lash extensions) ...whoever gets it, I'll make it worth your while.'

Katrina Watson

Katrina Watson is a retired doctor. She has had one novel published (*The Bones*, 2023) and has one on the way (*Tsunami*). She's been runner-up in several national short story competitions.