

One

“Charles Wetherby Thomas, you have been convicted of the crime of embezzlement of funds in your care; funds belonging to a public who placed their trust in you.” Chas blinked, it was some time since he had heard his full name recited in public. He looked around at the courtroom. There was no natural light and the fluorescent tubes made the scene almost like a television studio. The furniture and fittings were a throwback to the last century. The dock rail he was resting his hands on was a sleek polished mahogany. The Gallery, which had been packed during the trial, was almost empty except for a few bored reporters. There was nothing like the interest in the sentencing as there had been in the details of the case. During the trial there had been plenty of people; notably his work associates.

The Judge continued solemnly, “You are hereby sentenced to eighteen months to three years in His Majesty’s correction facility with options. Do you have anything to say?”

Anything to say? – WITH OPTIONS? What the hell does that mean? Chas frowned and mumbled a “No Sir” and felt a small triumph at his snub of the judge in failing to give him his proper title. Not having experience of current Court procedure he assumed that ‘Your Honour’ was the correct address to a judge by a convicted person. His counsel had used the term during the trial. The words ‘Your Honour’ seemed not to fit a person who, Chas thought, had made up his mind early in the proceedings that guilty was going to be his verdict. He had virtually instructed the Jury to give that result. He was young for a judge, too young in Chas’s opinion, with neither a care for the complexities of a financial Court case nor much interest in getting at the truth. A high-powered, fast-climbing star of the new-age of judges with a keen eye for his future, where the speedy result was what mattered. This approach was smiled upon by authority because popular feeling was that lawyers were an overpaid section of the community and the shorter the trial the less the lawyer’s bill, which, in the case of a Crown prosecution, kept the taxpayer bill correspondingly low.

Chas had initially intended to give a statement but in the end decided to keep quiet and instead ask his lawyer for his opinion on an appeal. He felt that the least said at this time was the better approach: after all he had not committed the crime. Much of the evidence the prosecutor had presented had been as great a surprise to him as it had been to the Court and assembled media.

He was given no time to query the ‘options’ item but, anxious to gauge the reaction of the spectators, he was able to glance across at the public gallery to see, at the back, just one of his work colleagues staring at him. He had a fleeting thought that the colleague did not look too concerned at the sentence. Was there also a hint of a smirk? He dismissed the thought as a touch of paranoia.

He was quickly hustled down the stairs of the court dock to be locked in the cell below where he had plenty of time to ruminate on the matter. His case was the first of the day and his appearance had only been for the formal sentencing. It would be some hours before he was moved to the correction facility or given his ‘options’.

'Well,' he thought, 'the bastards did it'. It must surely have been someone from the group in the firm who had done the business. They had got him. Even at this stage he still found it difficult to accept that the law had been unable to clear him of the charges. The present day's financial affairs were conducted with a tight level of security, and strictly speaking his computer signature should have made it impossible for any other person to access details of the Stock Market dealings he had made. But it had been done. It must have been done. There was no other explanation. Chas could only think that perhaps he was a victim of some new sophisticated Internet fraud. The large credits that had suddenly appeared in an account in his name, but which he knew nothing about, should have been traceable back to the originators. Unfortunately, the firm had banned him from the terminals as soon as the business had been discovered so he had had no possibility of trying to carry out even the simplest of checks. He felt again the shame of the security people ushering him from his office and out onto the street where he had stood for some minutes, dazed by the speed of the action taken against him. In contrast, the arrest a week later and serving of the charges against him had been a relatively quiet affair.

He shook his head to try to clear it for yet another review of the trial proceedings. Standing, he stared in the aluminized foil that substituted for a mirror in the cell. He saw a 35 year old male, an inch short of 6 feet, 152 pounds, dark hair with just a touch of grey at the temple. Now a convicted felon, Chas didn't FEEL any different, but perhaps that was natural since he had not been guilty of the crime. His lawyer's face had registered his disbelief too obviously when he had said this and instinctively Chas knew that that was when he should have sacked him. Not having done so was the biggest mistake of his life, so far, he thought grimly. It was just that being innocent of the charges, somehow his faith in the justice system together with what he thought of as his standing in the company and, indeed, the financial world had stopped him from taking stronger action.

His thoughts turned to his immediate friends and colleagues, Ben and Jane in particular. Surely they wouldn't believe the charges. They must know that his computer signature had been got at in some way. He had been refused any attempt to contact them as they were key witnesses in the prosecution's case. The missing 60 MEG dollar credits was a tidy sum these days but he was used to handling GIGA credits on a daily basis. The fact that the amount had been credited to him, with background information showing it had been skimmed from the accounts he handled, was damning.

It was laughable really. He would certainly have been a lot subtler in handling the business if he had committed the crime. And that dumb judge, "You must have thought that you could escape the daily grind for good."

Ha! Being a free agent, he could do that anyway. Good physical and mental condition, with qualifications enabling minimum tied-time due to work obligations, he could settle anywhere in the West Bloc, and in the East for that matter. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he did not have to explain the situation to any close family or friends.

A drunk driver on the wrong side of a dual carriageway had left him without parents at the age of twelve. Fortunately his maternal grandfather was an able solicitor and had been instrumental in obtaining a substantial compensation from the drunk's insurance company. This had been used to provide Chas with a public school education.

Public school boarding was also a convenient way of avoiding any of his remaining relatives having to provide him with a permanent home. They saw him at holiday time only; times when he was shuttled back and forth amongst the different grandparents, emphasizing his orphan-like existence. He did have

some distant cousins, he remembered, but had not seen any of them since the funeral of the last of his grandparents. He had no knowledge of their current addresses except that they all lived far away. He was sure that they only turned up at the funeral to find out if they were beneficiaries of the Will.

Also he did not have a wife to come home to with a sad story to tell.

His background had resulted in him being an inherently shy person and avoiding more serious relationships later in life. Even in his college days, whilst he observed contemporaries pursuing girls and as a result missing course-work deadlines, he had rationalized that it was more sensible to complete his studies before getting involved romantically. He found working sufficiently absorbing to limit his extracurricular activities. Apart from an occasional weekend evening of almost deliberate relaxation he had avoided anything but the odd date. He supposed that he must have been regarded as boring by the college females, or perhaps he had just not met the right girl.

Looking back later he had seen that many of his contemporaries' liaisons had not endured beyond graduation, some ending in very distracting and messy divorces when the stresses of commercial life entered the equation.

Observing these experiences had made him wary of women, though at work, Jane had been a touch tempting; just a bit too obvious in her interest. Well, Ben was now free to exercise his options, as he thought of it in investment terms.

OPTIONS, there it was again, how would this compare with life in jail?

Jail was jail and everyone knew what that entailed these days. The pendulum had swung in favour of victims of crime and against criminals since the public outcry against organizations that provided over-the-top assistance to convicts. Jails were places to be avoided these days.

He looked round his cell and thought; 'let's hope the permanent place will be better than this dump'. The last tenant had obviously been the worse for drink and left his calling card in one corner. Chas wrinkled his nose but began to realize that he was going to have to get used to this sort of environment.

Two

His thoughts were checked by the sliding of the door and the appearance in the gap of the sharp features of Parker, his lawyer. Again the thought shot through Chas's mind that he should have trusted his own judgment in picking a lawyer rather than opting for one his friends recommended. He had mentally labelled him 'nosey' anyway and never felt empathy with the prat. The pinstripe suit fitting his spare frame, although intended to convey a dedicated professional, gave the impression of a typical snivelling Dickensian lawyer. His conduct at the trial had been perfunctory to say the least, Chas recalled. He had been on the point of sacking him at least twice were it not for the belief that the system would exonerate him.

"Morning Chas," he said, a slightly apologetic near-smirk on his face as he slid into the cell. "We should appeal of course, but I have to tell you that, in my professional opinion, we would need a large dose of luck in order to succeed."

This was exactly the approach that Chas did not want to hear.

"Specifically, what sort of luck?"

"Well, hard to say really, a successful outcome of the trailing of the computer records by the auditors would be item one. You know it could take many months for them to find the items you claim show other hands did the transfers, even if the will is there, which I suspect is not the case. You know how difficult it is these days with computers – a signature is a signature and the computer can't tell whose finger is on the key."

It was obvious to Chas that Parker was not familiar with the latest techniques used to identify the computer user, particularly in the sensitive world of finance. It was almost impossible for anyone other than the authorized operator to access a personal website these days. But, he thought, someone had done it and, moreover, covered their tracks well.

"I hope you're not suggesting that there is no incentive for the real culprit to be found?"

Parker glanced sideways, "It's difficult Chas. As far as the firm is concerned the matter is closed and you know that they will be more interested in damage limitation at this stage. They have to get clients' confidence back. The recovery of 60 MEG dollar credits helps of course, but if you could root out the remaining 10 it would provide more of an incentive."

Chas shrugged. "If I can't tell them where the 60 MEG went or how it was mysteriously returned, there is no way I can retrieve the rest, and in any case they won't let me near the terminals. Catch-22 and déjà-vu all over again, hey?"

Parker frowned at the attempt at levity; about the only emotion he had shown since Chas had met him. "Have you considered the options?"

The weeks of frustration and the offhand approach of Parker finally hit Chas who glared and barked, "Yes, what the hell ARE the options?"

"You obviously haven't been following recent developments in the treatment of criminals."

Chas winced. "Not being a criminal, it must have escaped my essential reading I suppose."

Parker's face now showed some emotion, in the form of a full-blooded smirk. His superior attitude was not helped by the minute bloodstain on his collar; the sign of a hasty morning shave. This minor distraction was quickly wiped from Chas's mind by Parker's explanation.

"Convicted criminals can opt for some form of community service rather than serve time in jail."

"What, you mean working with dropouts, druggies or disadvantaged kids?"

"No! That went out in '15 with the decrease in influence of the do-gooder organizations. That's when, after many years of near chaos in the treatment of criminals, officialdom realized that those methods were ineffective and that punishment was the way to reduce crime."

He did not mention that ordinary folk had known this fact many years before there had been change. Capital punishment was still not accepted for the crime of murder, though there was constant outcry for it to be reintroduced in many western countries' legal systems. Crimes against children and minors were currently on the agenda of the pro-capital-punishment organisations.

Parker continued, "It also had the effect of reducing the profession's workload."

Chas saw that Parker delivered this statement with a slightly sad tone, and thought; 'Yes, and the more recent, fairer application of the Human Rights laws, had stopped the more unscrupulous lawyers from abusing the system.'

Parker said, "The options facility is more likely to be doing work considered risky or particularly filthy, you know, stuff that they can't get people to do at any price. Options also carry the advantage that we can work on your case and, using public credits," (he smirked again) "go for an appeal if new evidence is brought to light."

Chas thought of himself wandering the streets of some city picking up bits of trash and considered for a moment that at least it would get him out of the confines of a prison cell for a day.

"Might as well get the details and see what's available. It can't be worse than possibly three years of prison life." It was beginning to dawn on him that the rock and the hard place were drawing closer together.

"I will make the arrangements and I expect you will get the details quickly. I hear that some of the work is considered urgent," Parker said as he swiped his visitor's card and registered his eye-dent at the door, sliding smoothly through.

Chas took a step towards the door and received a numbing shock from his ankle brace, stopping him in his tracks. It took him some minutes to recover and even longer before he could walk around his confined space. He was to learn that the electronic ankle brace was the modern equivalent of the chain in a chain gang but rather more limiting, and certainly more painful to the transgressor.

He shared the transfer coach to the local prison with a couple of characters whose conversation was a collection of grunts and 'you knows'. He felt the air of resentment of the pair who it was clear regarded him as a 'Toff'. He in turn, regarded them as 'Yobbos'.

Chas was reading the brief of his trial on his tablet, more to pass the time than anything else. The Yobbos were playing some game, competing against each other, on theirs.

"Want a game?" enquired Yobbo 1.

"No thanks."

"What you doin' then?" asked Yobbo 2.

"Just reading."

"Readin's a waste of time."

"Like, you know, and readin' in bed's a waste of fuckin' time," said Yobbo 1.

They both roared with laughter at this and even Chas had to grin.

Nonetheless, if it was possible, he resolved to steer clear of them when they reached the destination. He realized that he had just experienced his first lesson in his future life and that he would have to be careful in dealing with fellow convicts if things were not to be made even more difficult than they were at present. His current situation began to sink in and whereas before he had felt a little detached from the business, he was jolted into the reality of the fact that he now was a convicted person.

Daydreaming, he wondered if prison library work would be available to him. On the occasions when Chas had been to the cinema and when prison had been the subject, convicts with more than half a brain always seemed to get the cushy library jobs. Almost hallucinating, he pictured working in the prison library. At least he would have access to the knowledge available there. He could study Law! Perhaps by the time he was 'out' he could take the Bar examinations and eventually present an appeal against his conviction without the 'help' of characters like Parker. Having studied engineering and finance with some success, he felt that tackling Law would be a suitable way of passing time whilst away from normal worldly distractions.

The coach slowed and was passed through the double gates into the inspection area of the Prison and on to the reception building.

Induction into the new life was a smooth affair. He was quickly relieved of his personal items, issued with a simple uniform and taken to a cell; all the while by aloof prison officers who seemed only interested in getting the immediate tasks over as fast as possible. His tablet communication-application was disabled before being handed back to him.

There was no attempt at normal person-to-person communication. In fact he was referred to as '009' and occasionally 'Thomas 009'. It was all very coldly professional and there was a somewhat inhuman element about the process. However, he was pleased to find that he would not have to share a cell and this provided the only pleasant part of the business. He was soon disillusioned by the accompanying warder who quelled his rising spirits by telling him that this was only a temporary arrangement and he would be allocated a cell in the next two days. Apparently this was to enable the authorities the time to

determine compatible cellmates. This procedure had recently been introduced in an attempt to aid convicts' rehabilitation into society and, in particular, to ensure that first offenders were not placed with habitual hardened criminals. Back at the end of the last century, Chas knew, prisons had been breeding grounds for youngsters turning to crime. It was only after long meetings of various Committees that they had at last come up with this method of combating the criminal education of inmates. A disgraced politician, on release from prison after paying his debt to society, had written about the conditions and his experiences, drawing attention to a situation that he declared needed changing. A newspaper had then taken up the crusade and been the driving force for the change in prisoners' treatment by printing articles by time-served convicts which jokingly wrote of 'degrees' awarded in 'advanced burglary', 'confidence-tricks techniques' etc.

The re-offending rate had dropped dramatically as a result of the introduction of this policy.

What to do about sexual offenders was still occupying various experts and was the subject of lengthy papers to Learned Societies.

His cell was a fairly comfortable room but quite sparse. The bed he considered a little firm compared to his own. A table, chair, and even an easy chair completed the furnishings. 'Early plastic' came into Chas's mind.

Natural light came through the small, barred, high window. There was a screened section that contained a toilet and washbasin. It was warm but clinical. He noted the lack of television or radio; there was obviously to be no contact with the outside world. He passed the rest of the day in contemplation of his trial and puzzling how he had arrived in this situation. Getting to sleep was a seemingly endless business but eventually it happened.