

Maxwell's Daughter

Part One

Stephen Maxwell's balled fists squeezed harder on the armrests. His hands were wet with sweat as the seatbelt signs came on with an intrusively innocent chime. Not that it mattered; Stephen's seat belt had been securely fastened in place from the second he had sat down in the chair. It wasn't just a chair though it was a tomb; as if he'd strapped himself into an electric chair; a chair that could at any time bring his death. Man, he fucking hated planes.

The engine roared with growing intensity beneath him and staring out the window with an absent, supposedly casual glance, he noticed the plane had slowly begun moving forward. The stewardess of what Stephen assumed, no more than twenty-five, got up to give the usual routine of bullshit regarding their imminent deaths. Again, a pointless exercise; Stephen knew the procedures like the back of his hand, ironically the stewardess only made the fear suddenly more real for him, removing what little reassurance he had. She lifted the life jacket over her head; Stephen observed that the bright orange colour closely matched the tone of her face, and on reaching the blow into the whistle part, a loud wolf whistle sounded from two or three rows behind him. Stephen would have sighed and rolled his eyes but they were currently fixed on a plane in the distance that was too currently being boarded. If one plane was to go down, he thought...

'Hey man, you okay? You don't look so good.' John from the row across from him, separated by an Asian couple and the aisle.

'Yeah Steve, you look whiter than my Nan's arse.' Added Brent.

'The fuck you been looking at your nan's arse for?' Said John. The Asian couple were watching the two, not quite able to hide their disgust.

'I'm fine. Don't worry.' Answered Maxwell. 'Just don't like planes much is all.' The plane was now turning; lining up to the runway.

'Don't sweat it.' Said John. 'We'll land, grab some beer and get royally fucked yeah? It'll be the best night of your life I guarantee you.' That may be the case, thought Stephen, but he sure as hell couldn't guarantee the

plane not falling from the air like a raindrop.

The plane came to a slow stop, preparing for take-off and Stephen's heart rate increased accordingly. His eyes began to dart around the plane; the stewardess had finished her pre-flight routine and was now walking quickly up the aisle, shutting the overhead lockers; Stephen thought of all the plane crashes in Hollywood blockbusters in which the plane suddenly shook, the overhead lockers shuddering and then suddenly bang, they would fly open and luggage would be flying everywhere, people screaming, fire, the wings ripped off... No, come on, he had to pull himself together. A group of elderly men in the row in front of Brent and John were just fastening their seat belts. A miniature rage burned inside of him; the idiocy of it! The carelessness, what if the plane collided with another on the ground? Then their stupidity would serve them right. In the distance, the plane that had previously taken to the runway was growing smaller and smaller on the horizon. Before a spark of relief could take hold of Stephen, the engines roared to life and began pulling the plane forward at increasing speed.

His head shook violently against the seat for he was pressing his head back hard in an attempt to control his shaking. He gulped. This was it.

The plane shot along the runway, it maintained a speed for a second and Maxwell braced himself for the horrible sickening feeling he knew would come soon but the plane picked up yet more speed and before he could think about what was happening the plane was in the air, rising steadily into the sky. He stole a glance out of the small window to his left and immediately regretted it. A throbbing feeling quickly flooded his head as though water had soaked into his brain like a sponge. He looked straight ahead at the back of the seat in front and released his grip on the armrests. The Asian woman to his right was watching him strangely with a look of concern but at the same time, a look of aversion.

Stephen managed to settle his body after about twenty minutes of flight but his mind was constantly aware and paranoid. Another ten minutes later, an announcement that refreshments and snacks were coming round made him even more relieved. Stephen felt a tinge of guilt and his disappointment that it was not the attractive female from before but a red-faced boy that seemed of about nineteen. Stephen ordered a double whisky on the rocks and a bowl of mixed nuts. The Asian couple to his right was muttering in harsh whispers, which annoyed him even more than if they

had stood up and shouted at each other. Stephen pulled his iPod touch out of his jean pocket and put the earphones into his ears. The world seemed to fade into the background and he let his head fall back to the headrest and he closed his eyes.

He was asleep for at least half an hour and was awakened by a wet slap in the face. He woke in a jerk and quickly pulled his earphones out.

‘What the?’

-‘Hey man did you see that?’ John was sitting nearly on top of him and Brent beside him.

Stephen wiped his eyes, which were still adjusting to the light. ‘Huh? See what?’

‘The Asians sitting next to you started kicking off and were asked to go into the back to talk to the Stewardess, saying some shit about her wanting to get off the plane’ Brent explained. ‘Like some final destination shit. At least if we go down-’ He was cut off by a sharp elbow to the ribs from John.

‘Don’t worry man. We’ll be landing soon yeah?’ Stephen nodded, genuinely relieved. ‘Reckon we can sit here for now?’

‘Yeah, why not. I’m just going to the restroom.’ Stephen got up and squeezed past to the aisle. He strode toward the end where the illuminated toilet sign was but the closer he walked towards it the more he felt as though he would collapse. The light was suddenly a blur and his legs felt like lead. He stopped for a second, the light spinning around his head but he managed to steady himself a little and made it to the restroom.

Stephen shut the door behind him and slid down the wall to a sitting position. His whole body was shuddering and screaming for release. The lights above him flickered and cut out. He sat in the darkness, the wet floor soaking into his trousers. A low scratching was coming from the other side of the thin door. Beside Stephen, light was shining through the crack under the door but the shadow of a small creature was being displayed across the dark room. The light flickered again and came on. Stephen stood and splashed water in his face from the sink then took a piss. He left the restroom and paused outside. The Asian woman was trying to explain something whilst her husband was talking over her and another female voice was failing to calm them down. There was a curtain that was hanging in the doorway to the room at the back which they were in. Stephen followed the aisle to his seat where he was handed a vodka and coke.

He had just relaxed with the taste of sin strong in his throat when the seat belt signs flashed on with a chime. He looked to his left out of the window. It was near dark and rain was falling gloomily from the sky. In a matter of seconds, Stephen's seat belt was fastened securely and he was prepared for anything.

'Amsterdam here we come,' Said Brent strapping in and downing the rest of his glass.

The landing was smooth and Stephen remained relatively calm. They called a cab straight from the airport to the hotel. They opened the door and all three of their jaws fell to the floor. The five star hotel was beyond their expectations; a huge flat screen occupied most of the living room space with an impressive stereo system. Through the French doors, a hot tub was waiting. The three men moved onto the balcony where the sky was by now completely dark but the whole city, as far as the eye could see was lit up by bright, in many cases, flashing, coloured lights.

'Aw man this is gonna be the best night ever. So Steve bud, I gotta ask,' said Brent. 'What are your rules tonight?'

Stephen paused. The truth was he hadn't actually thought about it. He had never dreamed of cheating on her but is a stag night different?

'We'll just see what happens. She knows we'll most likely go to a titty bar but I don't want to end up being unfaithful if I can help it.'

'Yeah course man, we'll make sure you don't.'

'Can't promise the same for ourselves,' added John winking. 'Right Brent, go check the fridge for booze, half an hour to get ready then we're hitting this fucking city.'

'Three pints please,' Stephen shouted over the thumping bass of the club music. The burly bartender, who seemed rather out of place in a pink polo shirt pulled three pints and handed them to each of the men.

'Aw mate,' shouted John, nudging Stephen and Brent with his elbows and consequently spilling beer from his glass over his hand. 'Check out those birds over there!' He said pointing to the right side of the dance floor where about five girls were dancing, drunkenly clinging to each other for support. Brent downed at least a third of his pint and turned to the others.

'I'm going in.'

Maxwell stood watching from the edge of the dance floor. A girl at the back was eyeing him over which just added to his discomfort. The music was too loud. The lights too bright.

Stephen pushed his way through the crowds and out the side door into a cold alleyway, mostly dark save for one light above the door. He pulled a box of cigarettes from his pocket and lit up. He didn't smoke much at all but he always kept supplies with him in case life suddenly became too much and this was one of those times. He fell back against the wall, the smoke from his mouth rising quickly into the cold sky. The same scratching that Stephen had heard in the plane restroom was growing louder from behind him. He turned quickly but couldn't see anything. The small light above him only lit up a diameter of about five feet and beyond that was complete darkness. Something was being dragged across the brick wall towards him, growing louder and louder. As Stephen watched his eyes slowly unfocused to a blur and when his eyes saw a small hand appear from the darkness with fingernails as long as sticks of chalk. The scratching sound was certainly representative of it. The creature was not even knee height but Stephen's vision was so blurred he could not quite make it out.

'Hey.' Stephen jumped. A hand had touched his arm and he turned quickly to see the girl that had been looking at him. He tried to force a smile but his fingers certainly seared with pain and he flinched, dropping the cigarette, which had begun to burn his fingers.

'Shit!' He spat and jumped back. He look over to where the creature had been but only darkness was present. He turned back to the girl and tried to laugh it off.

'Sorry I didn't mean to frighten you,' she said with a shy smile.

'No, it's fine I was just er...' He looked back at the dark alleyway. 'Just getting some air.'

'Yeah, me too,' she laughed. There was an awkward pause.

'Fag?' Stephen asked, holding out the box of cigarettes.

'Oh I don't smoke,' she laughed again. She was beginning to annoy Stephen. He began to put the box back in his pocket but she grabbed his hand. 'But hey life's short. She took a cigarette and popped it between her lips, then looked at Stephen, watching him. There was another pause.

'You want me to get that for you?' he asked, reaching out with his lighter. He lit the cigarette for the girl who inhaled then instantly coughed. Stephen laughed a little to himself and again checked the dark alleyway for movement. Stephen watched the girl as she struggled to smoke the cigarette before she threw it to the ground and stomped it out.

'You know most of the guys in there are complete dicks,' she said finally. Stephen just stared blankly at her. Then she began to lean towards him. Stephen was staring down the alleyway behind her and didn't even notice until she was an inch from his face with her eyes closed.

'Woah, what the fuck?' he blurted, stepping back.

'Sorry,' she said, withdrawing, her expression that of a half-drowned rat. 'I just thought...'

Stephen watched her for a second then turned and walked back into the club.

He found Brent and John with the two drunkest girls in the club.

'Yo guys, can we bounce?' He asked taking a seat beside them.

'Yeah fuck this man, this chick's completely gone,' Brent replied. He downed the rest of his drink and followed the others out.

They followed the road to a strip club, Brent's idea. Apparently the girls in there would be professionals and not play about although Stephen suspected that's exactly what they would be doing. Inside was much less frantic. It had a nice, chilled-out vibe to it rather than the mental flashing lights and pounding music. They headed straight for the bar and ordered another pint each then went to the far side for V.I.P seating.

'Oi you, it's this man's stag-do, John said to the dancer, pointing to Stephen. 'You make sure to do something extra special for him tonight.'

'No it's fine,' Stephen muttered. 'Seriously.'

The dancer who was clearly foreign, Filipino maybe, walked down the white steps from the small stage that was lit up with strips of blue LEDs, and climbed on Stephen's lap.

'Hey, over here!' Brent called to dancers on the main stage and gestured for them to come over. Two more dancers came over and attended to Brent and John.

'Listen,' Stephen said holding the dancer back. 'I'm not really for this. You're a lovely lady and everything-'

'I take you to back room yes? Come on,' and before Stephen knew it, he was being pulled across the room to the private rooms. She sat him down on the bed and knelt on the floor in front of him.

'You're getting married soon?' She asked. Stephen gulped uneasily.

'Next week,' He answered.

She took his hand from his lap and ran a finger down his palm.

'Can I read your palm,' and then when he looked uneasy; 'don't worry I'm professional I just can't find anybody to pay for it.'

'Strange thing for a lap dancer to ask,' then after a slight scowl from the girl; 'sure whatever,' Stephen said, letting her take his hand.

The dancer's face was at first inquisitive then it stretched to a look of concern.

'This isn't good. Sir, what is your name?'

'Stephen, yours?'

'My name is Maria. Now tell me Stephen, your father was called Michael yes?' Stephen nodded, how could she possibly have known information like this.

'He did some bad things yes? Yes.... I see blood,' her eyes were now closed deeply. 'So much blood.'

'Fuck you!' Spat Stephen. 'What did the guys set you up to this?' She looked confused. 'Or you remember what happened? Big deal it was all over the fucking news.' He tried to pull his hand away but the dancer held on gently. She stroked his hand and lifted it up to her face.

'He always had his own chair am I right? No listen, every night he came home you asked him to read you a story, you stayed awake for him to come home from the pub, drunk and angry. But he never beat your mum, you know this. Despite everything he was always good to her. It broke both your hearts when he killed himself, following the events. You would lie with your mum in her bed and you would ask her to tell you the good things about him.'

Tears were streaming down Stephen's face. There is no way on earth anyone had known this. She touched his palm with her long, soft finger. Images flashed into his head. All the victims stacked up by a tree. His father on one more, she was screaming. Another image; a body hitting the surface of the water and sinking quickly. Down and down into the depths of eternity. Then another and another. His face was burning, his father's rage was igniting inside him.

'No!' He screamed and pushed the dancer back. She cowered in the corner but he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to her feet. He began kissing her and threw her violently back onto the bed. She clawed at him with her fingers, blood ran down his back. She tried to scream but he covered her mouth.

'You like that you naughty boy?' Teased a dancer, running a finger down Brent's chest.

'The question is do you like it?' He replied.

'Oh I love-' A door slammed open and Stephen strode out, headed straight for the door.

'We're going!' He barked angrily.

'Aw come on man,' moaned John.

'Now.' He said firmly and hurried out the door.

'Sorry ladies,' Brent said, taking his wallet out and handing them each a 50 Euro note before following the others out.