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The Mercy Seat

Martyn Waites

PROLOGUE

A SECRET AFFAIR

Tosher opened his eyes. And tried to breathe.

Something was covering his mouth, his face, something tight, constricting. He gasped frantically, tried to put his hands up, remove it, but couldn't. His hands, arms, wouldn't move. Panic rose in his chest; he forced his heart to slow down, his mind to remain calm, process his situation, his surroundings. He attempted deep breaths, felt the new second skin suck wet and clammy against his own.

He tried to move. Couldn't. He was tied to some kind of chair – big, sturdy, bolted to the ground – restrained by cords round his arms and legs. His body was naked. He shivered.

Tosher knew who was responsible for this. It wasn't a comforting thought.

His breathing began to quicken again; he tried through nose and mouth simultaneously, forcing air into his body, smelled only old, sweated leather, his own stale breath. The sound, amplified by the mask, was like that of a wheezing asthmatic.

Breathe out: his vision fogged, cleared slightly. Fogged, cleared slightly. But still dusty, opaque. He blinked: once, twice. Didn't clear. The opacity was external.

Tosher looked around. The building was old, dark. Dirt-streaked brick walls, high, rough-beamed roof. A warehouse, or something similar. He was sitting in a pool of light, dust motes dancing before him, as if spotlit on stage. Beyond the light, in the shadows, he could make out figures in mist vision, two of them, both looking at him. On seeing him stir, one stepped forward to the edge of the light.

'Back with us, Tosher?' he said. 'Good.'

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Tosher looked at the speaker. The tailored business suit and expensive haircut couldn't hide the meanness about him, the unrefined street-fighter in him. The danger. Tosher was aware of that. Had understood it the first time he had met him.

Tosher's heart began to race again. He began frantically to pull against the restraining bands.

'Struggle all you like,' the man said; 'you're in the mercy seat. You're not going anywhere.'

Tosher stopped strugging, became aware once again of the smell and sound of his own breathing.

'Know what a mercy seat is?' the man asked, then continued, not waiting for an answer. 'Check your Bible, if you've got one. Bloodstained altar where you made sacrifices. Listened to instructions.' He nodded. 'Sounds about right.'

Tosher looked at the other figure, the neatly bearded and blazered man. Half hidden by shadow, standing away from the speaker, his body language shouting he was not really part of the proceedings. The man was sweating.

'You've spotted him?' said the dangerous man. 'That's my partner, Dr Faustus.' He laughed, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was saying. 'Yeah, Faustus. That makes me Mephisto, apparently.' He turned to Faustus. 'Right?'

Faustus shook his head, turned away. Mephisto caught the action, looked at him.

'You don't like these names?' he said, laughing. 'They were your idea. Like everything else here.'

Faustus shook his head again. 'I ... I'm not going to be part of this,' he said. He started walking for the door. 'This is ... this is ...'

'All your idea,' said Mephisto, his voice sharp and hard. 'Now stay where you are.'

Faustus stopped moving, did as he was told. Mephisto turned back to Tosher. 'Now, you seem to have a problem doing what you're told. Taking instruction.' He stepped nearer, into the light. His heavy, spicy aftershave penetrated Tosher's mask. 'We can't have that, can we?'

Mephisto snapped his fingers. From out of the shadows came another man. Big, wearing workboots, jeans and a white long-sleeved T-shirt. Beneath the shirt was a muscle-pumped, steroid-assisted body. Tosher could make out trails and swirls through the material: black-ink tattoos looking like veins and arteries. His head was shaved. He was holding something in his hands.

'This is our companion,' said Mephisto. 'We call him Hammer. You'll find out why.'

Hammer smiled. Revealed a blue-sapphire tooth.

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Tosher struggled against his restraints. Much harder this time. He succeeded only in tightening them.

Mephisto laughed. 'Don't waste your strength.' He stood up, stepped back to the edge of the light. He held up his fist, raised his index finger.

'Three questions. Who did you tell?'

Another finger.

'What did you tell?'

A third finger.

'And what are they going to do about it?' Mephisto smiled again. 'Want to tell me now? Save the unpleasantness? Or want to see Hammer's party piece?'

Tosher said nothing; his breathing became faster, more laboured.

Hammer picked up a wooden block out of which was sticking a six-inch nail. The nail was showing over four inches. Hammer placed the block of wood on the ground in front of Tosher. Across his knuckles: FEAR, LOVE. He kneeled before it, concentrated. Then brought his fist down hard.

The nail was plunged right into the wood. Mephisto crossed to it, bent carefully down so as not to get his suit dirty, tried to pick it up.

'See that?' he said. 'Solid. Right through the wood into the concrete.' He stood up. 'Guess whose turn it is next?'

Mephisto grabbed Tosher's right hand, held it down over the arm of the chair. Tosher struggled, tried to cry out. His words were lost behind the mask. He had no time to feel beneath his palm, register how many splintered holes were already there in the hard, thick wood.

Hammer produced a nail, held it over Tosher's right hand.

Hit it.

Tosher screamed. The mask absorbed most of the sound escaping, reverberated in Tosher's own ears.

Mephisto stepped back, not wanting blood to arc on to his suit.

Faustus turned away.

'The other one.'

Mephisto and Hammer moved to Tosher's left side.

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Repeated the procedure.

Tosher felt his vocal cords strain and tear. His hands and arms felt like liquid fire was running up them. He struggled, tried to lift his hands up. The pain increased.

'Ready to talk yet?' asked Mephisto. 'Any sacrificial offers to make?'

Tosher screamed. Whimpered.

'What's that?' said Mephisto. 'Didn't quite hear you.' Mephisto looked at Hammer. 'Do his cock.'

Hammer produced another nail, held it over Tosher's groin.

Tosher screamed even louder.

Faustus threw up.

Tosher opened his eyes. And tried to breathe.

He didn't know how long he had been sitting in the seat.

He could have been there days. Or hours. Minutes, even. He had lost all track of time. Of pain.

He had passed out, he knew that. They had brought him round. And continued.

Every time.

They had been thorough. Hammer had enjoyed his work. Tosher could tell. He had broken his body, his spirit, his mind. Systematically, piece by piece. Until he was no longer a man.

Until he was less than nothing.

'He's back.' Hammer's voice.

Mephisto came over. Looked at him. 'Well, Tosher,' he said. 'Ready to talk now?'

Tosher nodded slowly, vision behind the mask blurred by tears, snot and spit.

'Good.'

Mephisto removed the mask. Tosher gasped gratefully at the air.

'Question one,' said Mephisto. 'Who did you talk to?'

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'Name's ... Donovan ...' Tosher spoke in slow, fractured gasps. '... Joe ... Donovan ... reporter ... Herald ...'

'Very good. Next question. What did you tell him?'

'Everything ...'

'Everything?'

'Everything ... I ... knew ...'

Tosher looked at Faustus. The blazered man was ashen-faced, shaking, near collapse. He couldn't look at Tosher, turned away from him.

'And how much do you know?'

Tosher told him.

'And what is Joe Donovan going to do with this information you gave him?'

Tosher tried to laugh. It came out as a guttural, painful bark. 'Use it against you ...'

Mephisto smiled. 'I doubt that.' He motioned to Hammer, who stepped forward, replaced the mask on Tosher's face. Tosher made no attempt to stop him.

'Very good, Tosher,' said Mephisto. 'Very good. See, you can do it if you try. Now, that's everything we wanted to know. We're finished with you now. One last question – are you going to talk to this Joe Donovan? Or anyone else?'

Tosher shook his head, let out a groan that could have been a 'no'.

Mephisto smiled. 'Good man. I believe you. But you know what it's like – a few months down the line you start feeling brave again, think, That wasn't so bad; I'll make them pay for that. We can't have that, can we?'

Tosher let out a groan that could have been 'I won't'.

'Risky, though. Not a chance I'm willing to take.' He began pacing again, appearing to think about it. He stopped, turned. 'I'm going to let you go. Show mercy. But I'm going to make sure you don't talk to anyone.'

Something in his tone stopped Tosher from feeling relief.

Mephisto circled Tosher, his soles and heels like whipcracks on the cement floor.

'Know much about history, do you, Tosher?' asked Mephisto. 'Military history, I mean? Recent stuff?'

Tosher said nothing. Heard only his desperate, broken breathing.

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Mephisto sighed, shook his head. Kept walking.

'Course not,' he said. 'Russia. Early 1990s. The old Soviet Union breaking up. The death of socialism, the triumph of capitalism. All the old Eastern Bloc countries breaking up, the comrades wanting McDonald's and Levi's. Boris the Bear having trouble holding on to the territories. So what did he do? In his vodka-soaked state? Sent the tanks in. Everywhere.'

He stopped pacing, faced Tosher.

'And the most uppity of them all was Chechnya.'

Mephisto laughed, resumed his walk.

'Don't know why I'm telling you all this. Wasted on scum like you. Anyway, what the Red Army used to do—' He turned to Tosher, looked him directly in the eye '—the Red Army, the most powerful fucking fighting force in the world, the army nobody fucked with—' He resumed his walk. '—well, they got pissed off with these Chechen rebels. So they fought dirty. They would capture them, make them talk. Then make sure they could never talk again.'

He stopped. Bent down, face to face.

'Know how they did that? Mustard gas. They would get a gas mask like the one you're wearing, strap a can of mustard gas to it and invite their prisoner to breathe in. After that ...' He shrugged. 'You don't feel much like talking. Well, you can't, really.'

Hammer moved forward on command, began attaching a canister to the front of Tosher's mask.

Tosher began to cry.

Mephisto slapped him on the side of the head. 'Be a man,' he said. 'This isn't mustard gas. We couldn't get any. So we're using a compound supplied by Dr Faustus over there. It'll do the job just as well.'

Hammer finished his work, opened the valve on the can, stepped back.

Tosher tried to stop sobbing, tried to hold his breath.

'You've got to breathe sometime,' said Mephisto. 'Sooner you start, the sooner you'll get it over with.'

The gas was clouding Tosher's face; it felt like acid burning away at his skin, his eyes, peeling and bubbling.

'You bastard ...' he sobbed, 'you sick bastard ...'

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His last words. And Mephisto couldn't hear them.

Tosher breathed.

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