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## The Unwild West

It felt so good to be a quitter.

There I was, having given up on my dreams and resigned myself to a quiet life. My guitars were in storage and the Vortex Winder lay dormant, just as it had for the last three years.

Even Sandra was back on the scene having forgiven me my madness of the years before. We'd left the glamour of Sydney's east to live in the unwild western suburbs. After all, that's what she'd wanted. It was in fact west of the west – in the Blue Mountains out past the city limits. I retired from music, got a real job and settled into a quiet domestic life.

Sandra? The Vortex Winder? Forgive me. I must remember that many readers have no knowledge of my past adventures.

And whose fault is that? Yes, this book is a sequel. Goddammit - if a few more of you guys had read the first one, we wouldn't be having this difficult conversation! As it is, not only am I forced to give a summary of that book, it has to come without spoilers. Otherwise none of you will ever go back and read it at all now, will you? Really, you are very thoughtless at times.

So here's the deal. I'll give you a spoiler-free summary of the first book. In return you will agree to suspend your disbelief about the strangeness of the events described. There's no denying that the story was rather bizarre. That's just the way it is. It will soon be obvious that we're 'not in Kansas anymore,' just somewhere that looks very like it on the surface.

It all began one night when I fished a drowning cockroach out of a hotel toilet. And granted, while that was probably the most appalling start to a book in recorded history, this random act of compassion changed my life. As if in a modern fairytale, the cockroach turned out to be a shape-shifting being named Iolango. He rewarded me with the 'Vortex Winder,' a wish-granting device which awakened my old dream of being a famous writer and musician.

In pursuit of that dream I broke up with my girlfriend, Sandra and embarked upon a wild ride. The Vortex Winder led me down a path that included a love affair in Germany, a period as a pro gambler, and a hellish stint in an Asian prison. After my escape from the prison, I did indeed release a book and an album. Yet the only fame to result came from a ludicrous YouTube video that went viral. Finally I was drawn into a showdown with my nemesis, Elijinx. A shape shifter like Iolango, Elijinx brought me within a breath of extinction before I escaped to fight another day.

Out of remorse for the trials he'd put me through, Iolango offered to return me to the point in time where the story had begun, erasing my memory so I could take a different path in life from that point. I'd refused, choosing not only to preserve my memories but to relate them as 'fiction' in a novel.

The novel was itself called *The Vortex Winder*. When it was published, I had high hopes for it. Ever the optimist, I'd believed it could be a hit - but it never really took flight. Turned out the book industry was on its knees. It had been hard enough to publish and sell books ten years before. Now, like many other traditional trades, the book world was being eaten alive by the internet. Bookshops were closing down, publishers were going broke, the whole system was falling apart.

The novel even came with a soundtrack album of songs by my band. But as the music business was about as equally screwed as the book business, that didn't help much.

In my efforts to promote the book, there *had* been one flicker of interest from the publishing world, although it turned into a bit of a comedy scene in the end. I'd gotten through to a literary agent who'd taken a mild interest in my work. Let's call him Richard. Turned out he was prepared to republish it, but only if there were some major rewrites. I dropped into Richard's office one day to find he'd made it through the first six chapters.

'I've got to tell you, Jimmy, you've got something here. This whole modern fairytale shtick is a new twist on an old genre. It's contemporary and you're keeping some kind of realist edge without going the full-Potter. I like that - and the soundtrack music certainly adds something new. But there'd have to be some big changes before I'd even think about taking it on. '

'Changes? Like what?'

'The cockroach for a start. Not a very charming animal, is it? Your Iolango's a shape-shifter, after all. Let's change him into something a whole lot cuter.'

'A kitten maybe?'

'That's more like it. I mean, a cockroach in a toilet? At a heavy metal show? Please! You can't expect me to sell that.'

'Why not - what's wrong with it?'

'What's the largest demographic for fiction? Women 35-60 years old. You'll have lost half of them by the end of chapter one. If you want to reach that market, then write for it. I mean chapter six, the love affair with Freya - that's more like it. But why make her German?'

'Why not?'

‘Why not make her Italian? Or at least French.’

‘Uh ... because she was German?’

‘I think you’ll find Italy and France road test better with our focus groups, so why not roll with that?’

‘That’s pretty offensive to the Germans.’

‘That’s the research. For the same reason, I’d get rid of all the heavy metal stuff. Take out all the irrelevant little comments about music. Frankly, I’d change the soundtrack too.’

‘You said it added something.’

‘Sure, but again you’ve got to write for your demographic. Don’t take it personally, but you’d be better off with an album of R&B or show tunes. If you can’t do that style yourself, hire some pro songwriters.’

‘This is a joke, right?’

‘It’s common sense. Also, dump the gambling chapter.’

‘But it ties in with the themes of the book and it’s crucial to the plot. How do I - I mean how does he - get the money to go overseas if he doesn’t master the Black Art?’

‘Why not let him have a big win on lotto or the pokies? That way you can get rid of all the boring detail and cut it down to a couple of pages. Get to the point.’

‘Did you even read what I said about lotto in that chapter?’

‘If you really must talk about sports gambling, at least pick a sport with more global appeal. Rugby is only played in a few countries isn’t it? You’d be better off making it about real football. The round ball version. That would have a broader appeal. Why not make him a Manchester United fan? They’re a global brand now.’

‘Because that’s not the way it was. Everything you’re suggesting has nothing to do with what really happened. I can’t change the facts.’

‘What facts? It’s fiction, you can write whatever you want. As long as it’s what readers want too. If you want to make a saleable product then think about your target audience. Look, how about this - would you be open to workshopping the story with a small focus group?’

‘Creation by committee? Dumbing the whole thing down to the middle ground? Taking away the quirks that make it unique? I don’t think so.’

‘Then I really can’t help you.’

‘Let’s wrap it up then, Richard. You want me to change Iolango from a cockroach to a kitten, dump the heavy rock for show tunes, and make Freya Italian. You want to change it from a creation with quirks and the ring of truth into a bland product with mass appeal. And you’re only on chapter 6. Forget it.’

I walked away from Richard’s office and decided to pack it all in. The encounter was only the latest in a long line of obstacles in the quest to sell the book and CD. It was clear that the thousands of hours work it had taken to create them had been largely in vain. So I quit, got a job, got back with Sandra, and we took out a joint mortgage on a house in the Blue Mountains.

You remember Sandra, right? She was the yin to my yang. The teasing yet warm-hearted pragmatist I’d lived with a while back, before going off to chase my dream. We’d lived together for a couple of years before our breakup. Unlike me, Sandra was secure in the corporate world, a manager with a salary several times my own. A sensible girl, she’d set herself up with superannuation, health insurance, and all those other practical perks I’d missed out on in my risky life as a muso.

Although Sandra respected my artistic side, she did not approve of me spending thousands of dollars making albums that wouldn’t sell. When I’d taken that path instead of taking out the mortgage she aspired to, it had put our relationship under a terminal strain.

It was my own fault. Sandra really cannot be blamed for turning her back on me and taking up with someone more suited to her station - a fellow executive from the corporate world. Yet as it turned out, the affair didn’t quite work out as she’d hoped. I don’t know the full story but it turned out the guy was a self centred workaholic who never had time to do with Sandra all the things she liked doing with me. So by the time I’d finished all my Vortex Winder adventures, she’d returned to her status as a single woman and replaced both of us with a cat.

It was the cat who got me in the end. Alfie was a real charmer. Some cats are aloof and unfriendly, but Alfie was a grey haired, golden eyed purring machine. I met him the first time I called on Sandra, a couple of years after our break up. We were sitting around chatting in her flat and as I stood up to take my leave, Alfie literally jumped into my arms. As Sandra later told me, she saw this as an omen and it swayed her to thoughts of reconciliation.

It seems that Alfie had a fine instinct for Sandra’s best interests. She trusted this and made good use of it. After breaking with the exec, Sandra had a string of suitors. But whenever she had a prospective new boyfriend, the litmus test always came when he had his first meeting

with the cat. Alfie, circling sternly like a disapproving father, would check the guy out using his impeccable feline radar - and woe betide the prospect if he didn't measure up. As soon as a guy walked in the front door, Alfie would sniff and stare at him with an air of the utmost suspicion. If Alfie turned his back on her date, Sandra took it as a bad sign and would shoot the guy a disappointed look. If Alfie actually sat between her and the date on the sofa, well, the fella may as well have walked out the door then and there. On the other hand, if Alfie gave his approval with a purr and the consent to be stroked, the guy had passed the test and was allowed back for another date.

This sort of vetting procedure had been going on for some time when I decided to look Sandra up for old time's sake. It had been a couple of years. I entered her unit and gazed at her with fond remembrance, settling back seamlessly into the domestic scene. Almost without thinking, I began stroking the cat. The green eyed charmer at once set his purring machine in motion and blessed me with a lap-sit as I sipped a cup of tea. A light bulb went on in Sandra's eyes at this point, although I did not know why. I was simply glad to be back in her company. The cat added that note of warmth and a homely feel to the whole scene.

'So you *did* end up making your album, Jimmy,' said Sandra. 'How'd it turn out, then?'

'Great. I'll send you a copy.'

'I'll buy one, of course. What'd it cost you in the end?'

'Ten grand, all up.'

'Wow.'

'That's a pittance. The big bands will spend at least half a mill.'

'And you got it all back?'

'Nah, not even close. It's tough selling CDs these days. Nearly all the record shops have closed down. Haven't you noticed?'

'Now you mention it, I spose they have. I wonder why.'

'The internet, of course. Lots of people download their music now. Same with books. You can buy them cheaper on the net, so most of the bookshops have closed down too. Even the big ones.'

'Right.'

'So here's me with impeccable timing putting out a book and a CD and nowhere to sell them.'

‘You wrote a book too?’

‘Yeah, I was coming to that. It’s mostly fiction, so don’t get mad ... but actually, you’re in it.’

‘Me?’

‘Under another name, of course. Nothing bad, mind - you’re a likeable character. Well, apart from when you went to Melbourne and dumped me. That was in there - but I admitted it was my fault.’

‘Really Jimmy, if you were going to put me in a book, you might have let me read it first.’

‘Sure, I meant to. Anyhow, who cares? No one read it anyhow. This cat’s a champion. Where’d you get him?’

‘So what you up to now - still writing and playing music?’

‘Nah, forget it. All that work, thousands of hours, and for what? I’ve got a real job now. With a salary, holiday pay, sick pay, all of that. Might be normal for you but a real novelty for me, believe me.’

‘So, you’ve really settled down this time? It’s hard to believe.’

‘Come on, I’m forty. I haven’t just thrown in the towel, I’ve thrown it out. You were right all along, Sandy. A job, a mortgage? Bring it on.’

‘Are you sure, Jimmy? It’s weird seeing you like this. So if you’ve gone straight, I guess you’re married too.’

‘One of these days. Why not, if I meet the right girl? Well, great seeing you, Sandy.’

I stood up to take my leave and moved Alfie gently from my lap to the sofa – only for him to crouch and take a giant leap right back into my arms! I found myself clutching the cat and laughing in delighted surprise. Sandra too was smiling, for her own reasons. You can guess the rest. It was only a matter of time before our romance was back on the table and we’d taken out a mortgage on a house in the Blue Mountains.

So, between the efforts of Richard the agent and Alfie the cat, Sandra and I were rejoined in holy de facto matrimony and I became a normal person at last, living a simple life in the unwild west for evermore.

Or so I supposed.