

School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts

Hybrid Texts and Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid Texts and Historical Fiction

Composed of

The Bloodiest Rose,

Novel

And

Truth, Fiction and History,

Exegesis

By

Ian Nichols

The Bloodiest Rose is based on the premise that the fair copies of Shakespeare's plays are discovered, and a production of his previously unknown *Henry VII* takes place in Sydney. It is an attempt to create a narrative which is factual, entertaining and truthful. The exegesis is an analysis of how fiction is able to form a framework by which the facts may be told differently, but still faithfully, as human truths.

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THE BLOODIEST ROSE

By Ian Nichols

A
History of
King Henry the Sixth of England
The first part
By
William Shakespeare.

Right Worshipful, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton,

My humble duty remembered, hoping in the Almighty of your health and prosperity, my most humble and dutiful thanks for your Lordship's bountiful goodness towards me at all times, I have made bold to present your Honourable Lordship with such poor and homely things as I have made under your patronage and after, in the hope that such memories as are within these will remain with you when I am gone.

My life is within these words. Much of it you already know and it has become familiar to you as you were my good patron for many years. The poor attempts at poetry were for you, although, for a time, you favoured another, one who lies dearly within both our memories as a mark for our love, and as great a poet as ever lived upon this weary world. Of him, I could not be jealous, although he, for a poor moment in time, made me fear for your path. Enough, he is dead, sadly dead, with no more jests.

I have added not one morsel to the texts; they are my fair copies, held close by me these many years, as close as my children. Forgive them their imperfections, as I forgive my children theirs, for these are in the ways of making some kin of yours, my good lord, engendered by your generosity and your love. I have put words to them regarding their nurture and their case, a few pardons for how they came to be made and for what beggarly purposes they were performed. I have, in particular, noted some details regarding the poor work that walked once upon a guarded stage, which came from the rudiments of intrigue and a history unknown by common chroniclers, but known to the few who walked in shadows for a while. I place it in your hands as evidence of the trust and love in which I hold you, for it is my very life if seen by unwonted eyes.

Your Humble and Obedient Servant,

Wm Shakespeare.

CHAPTER ONE

Dirty old town, dirty old town. The words to the Pogues' song ran through Ed Cahill's head as the bus ground its gears going down Broadway towards Central Station. He'd been away eight years, and Sydney hadn't got much cleaner, even if some of the warehouses in Pyrmont were expensive flats now. There were memories that overlaid his sight as the shops and restaurants passed by. Grace Brothers, the La La Rooke, bits and broken pieces of the Sydney that used to be, turned into glossy toys and stood up on end for people to celebrate the architecture until it fell down, which wouldn't be too long in the future. *So much is false here, now,* he thought, *that used to be honest; tatty, dirty, but honest.* When he'd been a kid here he'd marvelled at the old buildings and how they'd seemed to be built to last forever. Later, as a young man, catching the bus home to Balmain when he'd been on leave from the Navy, he'd started to see that they didn't last forever, after all. They lasted right up until the time that they were too old-fashioned to be fashionable any more. As he got off the bus and made his way up to the station to catch the train to Newtown, he thought that he, too, might be getting a bit like that; too old-fashioned to be fashionable any more. Ah, well, let's see what this new show would bring. Another opening, another show.

OoO

Ed said into the intercom, "Bring up the house lights, Terry."

What had been dark, a gulf of silence, brightened into an auditorium. Down the aisle to the stage, cushions lay eviscerated like gutted animals, all horse hair and springs. Cobwebs hung from banisters and festooned the faux sconces that held the side-aisle lights. Ed stood by the central pair of double doors from the foyer, studded with leather and set in felt jambs, and looked up to the vaulted ceiling far above, hidden in gloom but with a ghostly chandelier just visible. He said "Christ, it's a big bastard."

"The pride of the late nineteenth century." A tall, slender figure walked from behind him into the auditorium. "It can seat roughly 2,300 people in the stalls, mezzanine and up there," he pointed towards the ceiling, "in the gods. There are a dozen private boxes for the elite, six on each side on three levels, and they could probably squeeze another hundred people into them if they tried." His voice was as soft and cultured as a fine Brie.

Ed looked around and scratched his ginger crop. "Barry, it's a fucking wreck."

“No, not at all,” Barry MacGuire said. He waved a graceful hand in the general direction of the stage. “The engineers say it’s as structurally sound as the night its first show went up, which was, eerily enough, *Richard III*. The vandalism you see is all cosmetic. A team of volunteers from the local historical society will be here to start the restoration work on Monday week.”

“What’s the stage like?” Ed said.

“Basically sound,” Barry replied. “But it hasn’t been used for over thirty years. All the mechanisms have to be tested and repaired, if it’s absolutely necessary.”

Ed looked down to the distant stage, shrouded by its velvet curtain, deep red with a gold fringe pooled on the stage floor. “Let’s go up and have a look, then.” He spoke again into the intercom next to the door. “Terry, we’re going up on the stage. How’s the bio box?”

A voice came back, somewhat distorted by static. “Out of the ark. The lighting board must have been the latest thing in about 1970, and there are a couple of beautiful Grundig reel to reel tape decks for effects. There are tapes in them, but I’m scared to turn them on.”

“We’ll try to get you some new stuff.”

“Don’t you dare! These are classics. They make me feel like a real lighting man again.”

Ed grunted and switched off the intercom. He followed Barry as he picked his way through the debris in the aisle towards the stage. Ed spotted a pair of lacy black knickers on a seat, frosted with dust. Further down there was a single grubby Adidas sneaker tied to a chair arm. The auditorium towered around him in its tatty glory, up to the ornate ceiling rose, richly decorated with plaster figures. He could see the faded gilding on the proscenium and the mantles of the boxes. Rich crimson panels lined the gods and the mezzanine, decorated with Tudor roses at their corners. There were shields painted on wooden blanks in their centres, and he could make out the designs of those on the boxes, all of them different. He mentioned that to Barry as they walked around the pit to the stairs beside the stage.

“The noble houses of Britain,” Barry said. “The great houses on the boxes,” he waved languidly to the OP side, “and the household shields from Tudor to Hanover are on the Royal Box. Fin de siecle aesthetics at their most triumphant. Built in time for Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee.” He opened the little door to the steps and started to climb them, careful to keep his tailored black slacks and mohair cardigan from the dust on the brass banisters. “When it was sold, fifty years later, and the name changed, it would have been too expensive to change all the shields over, so they settled for putting a banner over the Royal Box.”

Ed looked to where Barry pointed, and saw the sad, dusty bunting that drooped over the first OP box. “Did the Queen ever see a show here?” he said.

Barry sighed as he delicately pushed away a fold of the burgundy velvet curtain and edged towards the wing. “No, not even when she visited Australia in 1954. The theatre was dark then, after it had been made into a cinema to entertain the troops in the war. It never saw full-scale theatrical productions again, only a few touring shows. Pity, really; it was a beautiful place once.”

Ed could see that. The whole design had an elegant classicism that put him in mind of the great old British theatres. Perhaps it leant a little towards the overdone, but there was a feeling, an ambience that you didn't get in modern theatres, for all their plate-glass efficiency. He liked it for being a survivor from a more glorious age, back before theatre had been ruled by accountants. He'd caught the tail-end of that period when he started working in the business. He gave a wry grin. *I must be getting old*, he thought, *if I remember some of those bloody old barns as better. They weren't all as good as this one; some were bloody death-traps.*

It was dim on stage; the house lights were effectively blocked by the curtain, but Barry brought out a small torch and walked past a maze of furniture, props and ropes to the wall. He flipped a switch and the workers flickered hesitantly to life. He turned, spread his arms and bowed. “May I present,” he said “The Liz.”

Ed turned and looked at the stage. “Good God,” he said.

The stage resembled a Dadaist New Year's Eve party on New Year's Day. A giant stuffed snake of green corduroy lay tangled with a broken-wheeled unicycle on a chaise longue. A series of papier-mache pots, painted in rainbow colours, stood tidily ordered by height, except the one second from the left was absent, like a missing tooth. An assortment of body parts from mannequins was jumbled in a fluorescent pink wheelbarrow. There was an entire cottage garden on wheels. Part of the stage was elevated, and a neatly pressed gold tuxedo, complete with a mauve dress shirt and polka-dot bow tie, hung from a cherry tree in its centre. A flat depicting a wild-west saloon was half-raised into the flies, with central batwing doors that were slightly askew on their hinges. There was a lion with a watermelon in its mouth. There was all the sad detritus of all the productions that had faded into dead memories.

Ed looked up and spied an object that hung from the third fly bar. “A glitter ball?” he said. “What obscene use was that put to?”

Barry said “The very last show here was a benefit concert for a football club. They caused much of the damage to the auditorium, I believe.”

“Jesus Christ!” Ed turned around, bemused and vaguely offended by the mess. He squinted into the gloom by the wall. “Those are hand-paged flies,” he said. “I didn’t know that they were still *possible*, let alone still used. How big is the crew for this show going to be?”

“Mr Mayne has asked if you could keep it down to the minimum; we are on a tight budget.”

“I hope he can afford a few stage-hands.”

Barry smiled. “Oh, he can, within very clear limits.”

Ed spotted an intercom box beyond the fly ropes. He strode over to it and pressed the attention button. “Terry,” he said, “are any lights set?”

The answer came back in a raucous whisper. “Quite a few. The lamps are probably stuffed, though.”

“Can we bring them up?”

“The engineers said the circuits were okay, so I can try. The house lights came up alright, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. I’ll see if I can get the curtain up and I’ll come up to the bio box. I want to see what this thing looks like under lights.” He turned to Barry and gestured to the thick curtain rope. “Give me a hand. I want to get this thing up.”

“This is a Sorbier cardigan, for god’s sake,” Barry said, casting a shocked look at the hairy, dusty hemp.

“Well, take it off and give me a hand with this rope.” Ed took his own denim jacket off and hung it from a convenient plastic cactus. He had a grey t-shirt underneath. His arms were solid with muscle and covered with wiry red hairs and freckles. His left forearm had a fouled anchor tattooed on it.

Barry took a tissue from his pocket and carefully wiped down a plaster statue of Venus, then delicately draped the cardigan over it. He wore a cream shirt of light silk, and he meticulously rolled up the sleeves as he joined Ed at the rope.

“Get on the upstage side,” Ed said. “You pull the rope up, I pull it down. Don’t forget to let go.” Ed stretched his stocky body up and took a grip on the rope. “Okay; one, two, three *pull*.”

For a second, there was no response from the rope, and then it began to move. The curtain stirred, and let fall a mist of dust. The wrinkles fell out of its foot and it rose ponderously to reveal the auditorium beyond. It was, Ed thought, like a dowager duchess rising with dimly-remembered grace for one last dance at the ball. *Jesus! I am getting old*. But it was good to feel the rope under his hand, the

oily, gritty strands of hemp were like an old friend, long-time gone, now back again. The curtain ponderously gathered momentum, and Ed said “Okay, swap sides. You pull up and I pull down.”

Barry complied, but flinched when his hands were nearly pulled under the rope into the pulleys below the floor. Ed grunted “Shit” and held the rope as he walked up the wall on his side. The curtain stopped its rise.

Barry said plaintively, “I think I have a blister.”

Ed ignored him and walked to the intercom. “Terry,” he said. “Take down the house lights and bring up whatever stage lights you can. I’ll kill the workers.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Terry said. “I’ll bring them up one at a time, but slowly. No more than half.”

Ed reached over and clicked off the work lights. He walked out to centre stage as the house lights dimmed. There were a few moments of soft blackness and silence. Ed clapped his hands and listened for echoes. The sound filled the hall and was absorbed by the empty seats. As if on cue, a light came up on stage left, high and dim, then slowly brighter. It was joined by others, a constellation of random stars, some coloured by gels, some bare and white. The derelict clutter of the stage became a field of shadows, of mysteries and dramas. Ed stared out into the hall, feeling the familiar twist in his heart, and muttered “Comedy, tragedy, history.”

Barry walked out to centre stage to join Ed. “What was that?” he said.

Ed raised his voice a little. “Comedy, tragedy, history.”

“Particularly history,” Barry said. “On August 22nd, we act it out, and we make a little history, as well.”

“Four months,” Ed said. “Bloody hell!”

OoO

Terry Fraine smiled at them from behind his horn-rimmed glasses as they came into the bio box. He’d worked with Ed for more than ten years, a refugee from the public service. “Listen,” he said, and held out a pair of headphones. Ed listened to what played on the tape, frowned and gave them to Barry, who also listened for a moment and then said “Cinderella?”

“Yep. Prokofiev,” Terry said. “Don’t know the orchestra, though. It’s lasted well on these.” He flicked his hand at the two massive reel to reel tape decks against one wall. “I reckon you still can’t beat tape for good sound. These are half-inch decks. Four track.”

Ed looked around the bio box. "It's big enough."

"Yeah, you get that in these old houses. Old equipment was big, and they'd probably have three or four people up here to handle it. There's enough room for a projector over there," he waved a skinny arm, "and there's a storage room through that door beyond it. There's a splicing table and some lamps and fuses in there."

"What's the board like?" Ed said.

"Eighty circuits, triple preset, all manual. Needs a clean, but that's all."

Ed walked to the projection window. The lights were still up on the stage. They made the set look lonely. It was a good hall, Ed thought, nice clean lines and it sounded like it had pretty good acoustics, although the actors would still complain; they always did. That thought caused him to turn to Barry, who had discovered a sheaf of old foyer photographs and quietly squeaked with delight as he turned them over.

"Barry," he said, "who's the director?"

"Mr Mayne hasn't chosen one yet."

"Hasn't chosen one? How much choice does he think he's going to have?"

"A great deal. He suspects they'll be falling over themselves to direct this play."

"That's another thing. He's hired me to get this theatre ready and to stage manage a play. He didn't mention what the play was."

Barry coughed lightly and said "Yes, he left that to me. Have you seen enough of the theatre? Yes? Then let's go somewhere for coffee and I'll explain all."

OoO

They walked down King Street in the autumn evening light to a lane which took them down to a miniature park, one of those curious anomalies of the inner city. Autumn was the best season for Sydney, Ed thought. Spring was a lottery, summer was just too bloody hot these days, and winter was dreary. He had been back here a few times over the last dozen years, more often to Melbourne, and the place changed constantly, traffic got worse and buildings got taller. But there was still the harbour, where you could go and watch the ferries come over from Manly, and cruise ships come in from all the ports in the world. Garden Island was still there, with its grey gantries craning over the warships, some of them ones he'd worked on. It could be a good city, for all its frantic pace. These soft evenings were like the ones in France and Italy, where people sat around at cafes, drank coffee and

were content with the day, or England when you could have a couple of pints at the local pub and still have light to walk home by. But, much as he was Sydney born and bred, Ed was glad he'd travelled. First with the Navy, then with touring shows. There was a wanderlust in him in then, but sometimes, in the quiet hours, he wondered whether it had been satisfied by now. He looked down and saw his big feet in their brown Rockports striding away on the pavement, steady as ever. He was in his forties, fit and healthy, but he didn't feel the urge to get on the next plane to somewhere else as much these days. He grinned as he thought this, and his slightly battered face relaxed. Maybe it was Linda's influence, or maybe he was just getting old.

Even so, he was glad for the work; it was even better that it was in Sydney. He, Linda and Terry had been at a loose end when Mayne had given him a call in London, after a shitty show had fallen apart on them. They'd met, talked about the mysterious show that Mayne wanted him to run, and he'd been hired, along with Linda and Terry. Mayne had impressed him as something of a wheeler and dealer, someone who liked to play his cards close to his chest, but he'd liked him, and he was paying the bills.

Barry led them into a dimly lit café with "Bellagio" written on the window. A few old men sat around a table with their hats on, playing cards, just as they would have in the old country. They looked up as the trio came in, but nodded when they saw Barry and went back to their game. A stout, moustachioed man in a white apron bustled out of the kitchen with a tea towel in his hands towards a counter with a big, copper domed espresso machine on it. He tossed the tea towel onto the counter and came over to embrace Barry.

"Eh, Barry, com'e stai?" the man rumbled.

"Non cé malé, Agnello," Barry said. He detached himself from the hug and turned to Ed and Terry. "Agnello, these are my friends Ed Cahill and Terry Fraine. We're all going to be doing some work at the old Liz."

"Ah, 'giorno signores." He shook their hands warmly. "It would be good to see the old theatre running again. There hasn't been a show there since my father's time." He led them to a table in a corner and seated them. "Now, what would you like?"

"Coffee, please, and some biscotti." Barry said. Agnello beamed and went back into the kitchen.

"I hope you don't mind espresso," Barry said, "because Agnello would be insulted if I ordered latte or flat white or anything like that. His wife makes the biscotti, and they're absolutely divine." He fluttered his hands to show just how divine they were.

Agnello came back with a platter of thin, crisp biscuits and then busied himself with the espresso machine. Ed tried the biscotti. Barry was right; they were superb. Ed said as much to Agnello when he brought the coffees.

“Grazié. Serafina will be pleased you like them,” he said, and went over to the card players.

The coffee, too, was great, Ed thought as he sipped his. Barry took some papers from his suede briefcase. He put one in front of Ed and Terry.

“Now, Ed, Terry, these are copies of the contracts you signed.” He pointed to a paragraph at the top of the third page. “Can I direct your attention to this and the following few paragraphs.”

Ed read through it, then looked over at Barry. “It’s a non-disclosure agreement,” he said, “we knew that when we signed the contracts.”

“Yes.”

Ed looked across at Terry, who shrugged, and then turned back. “It says we can’t reveal the contents of the play, any lines from it, anything about it, except what’s released in publicity, until it goes up.”

“That’s right.”

“On the 22nd of August.”

“The pre-publicity will commence approximately four weeks before that.”

“What is this bloody play?” Ed asked, with a hint of impatience in his voice.

“I’ll give you both copies of it in a moment,” Barry said. “You’ll have to give them back though, I’m afraid. Mr Mayne has instructed me that all the copies are to be locked away at night, and none are to leave the theatre until the play actually starts production.”

Barry tucked the contracts back into his briefcase and beckoned Agnello over. “Agnello, could we have three more espresso, please, and a little grappa with them, per favour?” he said.

Agnello winked at them, gathered their empty cups and went back to the coffee machine. He came back with the coffees and three tiny tumblers full of clear liquid.

When he had left, Barry sipped his grappa and sighed. “This is home-made, too, by Agnello’s father, who retired to a little place up near Spencer ten years ago.”

It was, Ed thought, excellent, just like the biscuits. But enough was enough. “Now tell us about this play,” he said.

Barry reached into his briefcase again and withdrew two A4 manuscripts, typed and bound. He pushed them across to Ed and Terry.

Barry looked at them both and said “You can see from the title on the front page that the play is William Shakespeare’s *Henry VII*.”

Terry shook his head. “Shakespeare never wrote a *Henry VII*.”

Barry said quietly, “Oh, yes he did.”

OoO

They went back to the theatre and up to the manager’s office backstage. Like the bio box, it was decorated with old posters and photographs, a testament to the history of the Liz. The phone, though, was a brand new confection of buttons and speakers, on which Barry placed a call as he invited them to sit on the hard chairs that were in front of the desk. Barry had put it on conference mode, and they heard it ring a few times until it was picked up.

“Hello?” a light baritone voice answered. “Is that you, Barry?”

“Yes, Mr Mayne. I have Ed Cahill and Terry Fraine here.”

“That’s good, Barry. Hello Ed, Terry.”

They murmured greetings to the disembodied voice while Barry fiddled with his cufflinks.

“I’m sorry I can’t be there to greet you in person,” Mayne said. “I have to tie up quite a few loose ends and I just can’t get down to Sydney right now.”

“Whereabouts are you?” Ed asked.

“I’m up at the Gold Coast, fixing up a few details in the finances, but I have to fly out to Japan in three days, then I have to go to the UK and to the States and then back via Singapore, I think. I’ll be away for a while, but I’ll be in town well before the show opens. I should be back for the press release.”

Ed thought that the Gold Coast wasn’t usually seen as a centre for the finance industry, unless it was a certain type of finance that was dispensed from dark alleys and offered at exorbitant interest, but he wasn’t about to question it. Mayne was the angel, the man willing to finance the show, and it was his business where he got the cash. He’d seemed to have it all together in London. “Barry has told us that this is a new Shakespeare play, *Henry VII*.” Ed hoped his scepticism didn’t show too much in his voice.

“It is, and you have to keep that very, very quiet. This isn’t like those other plays that have been attributed to Shakespeare.”

“*Cardenio* and *Love’s Labours Won*,” Barry put in.

“Yes, this is guaranteed to be by the bard himself, no question about it.” Mayne sounded quietly jubilant.

“How do you know?” Ed asked. He knew a little about the history of Shakespeare from working on a couple of dozen productions of his plays, and he also knew that scams grew in the theatre like poppies in Picardy.

“It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you when I get down there to the theatre. For the meantime, just be assured that you’ll be creating a bit of theatrical history.”

“On pretty much a shoestring,” Ed said. Stage managers knew all too well that it never hurt to start asking for more money as early as you could, simply because it was pretty sure you’d have to ask for more before the end; shows never had a big enough budget for the grandiose expectations of the producers.

Mayne’s voice became serious. “Can you do it? I’d like to give you more to play with, but the cupboard’s a little bare.”

Ed thought it over before replying. “Yes, I can,” he said. “As long as nothing goes wrong and we can get the free help Barry’s said we can. I’ll need contingency money, though.” As much as I can get, he thought. There are *always* contingencies, always a little squeeze necessary to pay someone to make sure that everything runs smoothly.

Barry said quickly, “There’s a tiny amount in the slush fund, so don’t use it all at once.”

“Barry’s in control of all that aspect of it,” Mayne said. “I’ve never produced a play before, so I rely on him for the nuts and bolts of the budget.”

Christ, Ed thought, a virgin. I just hope he knows what he’s getting into. There’s an awful lot in theatre that doesn’t show on the surface. People see the glossy, finished production in all its glory and they don’t realise the prima donna’s dress is held up by a safety pin and some sticky tape. They don’t realise that there are deals done in back rooms with unsavoury characters to make sure that everything happens right. I just hope Mayne has chosen the right people to pay off, or this is one virgin that’s going to be fucked. I don’t know who the boss in Sydney is right now, but he’s going to expect his cut.

“Ed,” Mayne said, “I have every confidence in you. You have a tremendous reputation and you were recommended to me by some people up here you’ve worked with before.”

Who in the name of Christ would that be, Ed thought? Her looked across at Terry who mouthed 'Jupiter's' at him. He'd helped set up the revue there a couple of years ago, but he hadn't run it; they had their own crew for that.

"Well, thank you Mr Mayne," he said. "I'll get the job done."

"That's what I hear. I have to go now. Business dinner. Look after yourselves." He hung up.

Barry smiled at them. "Well, gentlemen, shall we get to work?"

Ed suppressed a groan at the thought of what had to be done to even get started. *Yeah, let's get to work*, he thought, *and remember that you're getting paid as of right now, and so are Terry and Linda, and that's a lot better than scratching around for some production that goes tits-up before opening night. Hold that thought.*

CHAPTER TWO

Ed Cahill groaned as he rolled over to turn off the alarm. He lay back and stared at the ceiling for a few moments, then sighed, groaned again and swung his feet out from under the sheets. Linda was on the other side of the bed, still swaddled in the covers. "What time is it?" she asked sleepily.

"Five-thirty, Linda. Too early for the wholesalers to be open." he replied. "Go back to sleep."

She rolled over, still swaddled. Two blue eyes peered out from a nest of tousled hair. "When do you have to be at the theatre?"

"Seven. You're not called until ten. Go back to sleep."

"I'm awake now." She sat up and stretched, tossing her head to clear the sleep from it. She was tall, slender, small-breasted and pale, with white-blonde hair that hung well down her back. "Are you looking forward to meeting the director?"

"Not really. I've heard she's a ball-busting bitch to work with."

"Just tell her I'm the only one allowed to have anything to do with your balls."

He smiled, leaned over and kissed her. "I'll be sure to, if the question of my balls happens to come up."

She nuzzled his neck and then yawned. "I might take the car and go over to Greenfields and to Broadway Textiles. I need to check out some materials for the costumes, as well."

“Try to pinch pennies, Linda. We have a tight budget.”

“Oh, go and have a shower while I make a cup of tea. I know how to work cheap. Is the restaurant open for breakfast this early?”

“It had better be.”

Ed felt more awake after breakfast. He caught a cab to the theatre while Linda took the car down into the garment district. Even this early, the city was starting to buzz. There weren't traffic jams yet, but there were slow points going up Broadway where it turned off into King St and headed up to Newtown. Broadway, he thought, there's one in every city, but this one doesn't have a single theatre in it. Central Station at one end and Sydney University at the other where it became Parramatta Road, lots of shops, offices and hotels, but no theatres. He smiled at the thought; everything's an off-Broadway opening in Sydney.

It had been hard work co-ordinating the volunteers Barry had found over the last couple of months and making deals to get everything as cheaply as he could. He'd pulled in quite a few favours to get there, but the Liz had come a long way in short while, he thought as he stepped out of the cab and paid the driver. He could see that all the graffiti and old posters had been removed, exposing the solid brickwork and the masonry of the Victorian facade. A team of grey-haired fanatics interested in restoring heritage buildings had worked like dogs to get it done, in return for tickets to opening night. A tiny voice in Ed's brain whispered “Let's hope there is one. You've just barely got a theatre, you've got no cast, and the director's only just now arrived on board. Pop in to the church later, Ed, because you might want to pray.”

Barry MacGuire stood in front of the newly painted doors with their polished panes, dressed in a dark grey suit with a thin red stripe, a picture of slightly louche elegance. Behind him and beyond the doors, the crimson carpet in the foyer had been scrubbed and the brass had been polished, the rubbish swept away and the gilt on the ticket office cleaned. Blue velvet ropes hung between gleaming brazen hooks in the doorways. Poster frames had been repaired and repainted, but were

still empty. Publicity hadn't started yet. In a couple of weeks the story would hit the papers, the posters would hit the streets, and the shit would hit the fan if everything wasn't ready to go.

"She inside?" Ed asked, nodding affably to Barry.

"Yes, and she's waiting for you." He raised a delicate hand and placed it on Ed's sleeve. "Tread carefully. I think she's pleased with the state of the place, but she had a bastard of a flight in from Chicago last night. She's made one taxi driver a eunuch so far, and she sent her coffee back three times at the hotel. Agnello's wasn't open, so I had to take her to a little place near the old markets before she was satisfied. Just remember, she and you will be working together on this epochal event, so it would be best to have a congenial relationship." He hesitated, and then said, "She is sometimes a little acerbic." He fluttered a hand. "Don't worry. It's just her way of speaking. Very direct."

"I'll try to remember," Ed said, and buried a smile at Barrie's nerves as they walked into the foyer. *Been there, done this before*, he thought; *taming the savage beast, all part of the job, but this one must really make Medusa look like a hairspray model.*

The work lights were up on the stage. It had been cleared of all the detritus of past shows and was open right back, past the cyclorama to the delivery doors in the back wall. It was enormous, Ed thought. It was bigger than any of the Opera House stages, and it had more wing space. More character, too, for all its age. It was built to look like a theatre, front and back, not to look like an entertainment factory. Even over the fresh paint, there was a hint of sweat and greasepaint. Right now, it was stark and bare, and Ed itched to see what it would look like when the set went up, when the lights were set and the whole thing started to come to life. That was the magic he lived for in the theatre, making a new world.

There was a woman standing off to stage right. She had her back turned to them. She was stick-thin, dressed in tight black jeans and a leather jacket over a white shirt. Her black hair was cut short, and she smoked a cigarette unhurriedly, drawing back and exhaling slowly, at long intervals. Her head was cocked to one side, as if she contemplated something on the back wall. As Ed and Barry made their way up to the stage, she turned towards them, revealing a sharp, tanned face with thin lips and

a pointed nose. Her brown eyes narrowed as she watched them come up onto the stage. She nodded to Barry.

“Dr. Madelyn Vale, may I introduce Ed Cahill, your stage manager,” Barry said. He didn’t quite bow.

She nodded again.

“Pleased to meet you,” Ed said pleasantly.

“Yeah. Sure. Likewise,” she replied. Her voice had a thick New York accent, almost Bronx. She gestured towards the flies with the hand holding her cigarette. “All those flies work?”

Ed said “We checked them, replaced all the cables and any bars that looked a bit suss, greased everything and ran them with weights on. They’re all fine.”

She grunted and turned away from them, looking back up at the flies as if she was still suspicious of them. “You know,” she said, “the last time I did a show in Sydney it was at the Opera House. They flew the set in from Chicago, where I’d been directing the same play. It was up late, just in time for the first dress. Crew had problems. I sat out in row twelve and watched. Came time for the first scene change and the revolve started up. Pieces of southern mansion landed right through the front rows. A small chunk of cornice landed in my lap. The set was thirty-two feet high and the proscenium arch was thirty feet high. We had to rebuild the main set in three days to make the opening night, and the actors,” she spat the word out as if it was an insect that had crawled into her mouth, “not only stumbled over their lines, they stumbled over the set, caught their clothes on nails that hadn’t been hammered in properly and lost the southern accents they had worked their arses off to acquire.” She turned back to them. “I was embarrassed. I swore that I’d never work in this fucking country again. Then this play came along. Mayne approached me because I’m the best Shakespeare director in the fucking world. He offered me a chance to do something no-one alive has done, direct a brand new Shakespeare play. He told me I’d work with the best actors and the best crew he could get.” She stared at Ed. “Are you the best?”

Ed looked at her calmly. “Yeah,” he said, “I am.”

Barry broke the tension. “Ed’s worked productions all over the world,” he said smoothly. “Every single one has run impeccably, even in the most trying of conditions.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Madelyn said. “I’ve read his resume. How he ran that opera in Brazil where the director walked out at the dress, how the touring show that wound up in a circus tent after the theatre they were supposed to be in burnt down kept going because he sweet-talked the local council into it. But you know what impressed me?” She turned and faced Ed squarely. “That *Dream* that you ran in Melbourne a few years ago.”

A small shudder ran down Ed’s spine at the memory of that particular horror.

Madelyn smiled, for the first time. “I figured if anyone could work with that temperamental butterball of a failed ballet dancer of a director when he was screwing the leading lady and teaching the actors karate to get them ready for Shakespeare without going crazy and setting fire to the set, I could maybe work with him.” She dropped her cigarette on the stage and ground it out, causing Ed to wince internally, and then held out her hand. “Glad to meet you, Ed.”

Shit, Ed thought as he shook hands, she could have bossed the engine room in any ship I was on in the navy, no question. “Pleased to meet you, too,” he said.

“Well,” Barry said, “I’m glad to see you two getting on so well together. Should we have a look at the set design now?”

Barry led the way to a table and chairs that were over in the stage left wing and put the laptop he carried with him onto the table as they sat down. He opened it up. “These are preliminary ideas for

the set,” he said as they waited for the screen to light up. “They follow on from the suggestions you made to Mr Mayne. Ah, there they are.”

The screen showed the set in plan, scene by scene, and then gave an impression of how it would look from the audience. Madelyn grunted in acknowledgement as each image came and went. “Hold it,” she said sharply. “Back it up one.”

Barry complied.

“What the fuck is that?” She pointed to the screen.

Barry tapped a key and a legend came up below the image. “Henry’s court, act 2 scene 4.”

“I said I wanted faux Tudor, not fucking mediaeval. Those flats look as if they’re from before the Norman Conquest. And what,” she pointed again, “is that thing that’s hanging above the throne?”

“It appears to be a very large sword,” Barry said. He tapped another key, and a box appeared on the screen. He read it and said “Yes, it’s supposed to represent the moral dilemma of Henry when he’s faced with the death of Arthur.”

“Fire the designer.”

“What?”

“Fire the fucking designer. I want the actors to show moral dilemmas, I want the words of the script to give them reason to show that. What I do not want is some dickhead designer from Bumfuck Technical College giving the audience crossword clues to what’s going on in the play, just so they can

hug themselves and say how clever they were. This is Shakespeare, not a murder mystery dinner. Fire the designer, pay them off or whatever. Toss them in the harbour if you want, but get rid of them and get me one I can work with. Get me Marco.”

“We asked him. He won’t do it.”

Madelyn glared at Barry for a few moments. “Why?” she asked.

“He said something about a dog.”

“Bruno? What did he say about Bruno?”

“He said that he couldn’t bring him into the country.”

“What? Of course he can.”

Ed shook his head. “No, he can’t,” he said. “Not without Bruno going into quarantine for six months.”

“Bruno’s got a pedigree longer than the fucking queen and sees a vet once a week. He’s healthier than an Olympic athlete crossed with a stud stallion.” Madelyn’s voice didn’t rise, but it got tighter, as if it could snap at any second.

“The quarantine rules apply to any animal coming in from another country,” Barry said as placatingly as he could.

“What? He’s in Jersey, fchrissake, not the Congo. Marco lives in an apartment, not on a farm. Bruno wouldn’t know what to do with raw meat except refer it to his personal chef. What diseases can he possibly bring in, apart from dyspepsia?” she glared at Barry. “I want Marco. He’ll do it if he can bring the Bruno into this hell-hole. You’re the production manager. Fix it.”

She stood, kicked her chair back impatiently and stamped out of the theatre, lighting a cigarette as she did so.

Barry smiled nervously at Ed. “She’s lovely to work with when you get past the teething problems.”

“Like when she’s got them set in your jugular?” Ed said.

“There is that,” Barry said. He gazed at the exit, then sighed and picked up his briefcase and the laptop. “Well,” he said, “I have to go and see a man about a dog.”

OoO

Ed and Linda had come to Doyle’s in Watson’s Bay for dinner and were waiting for their entrée to arrive. It was raining. The harbour had that misty glow that comes when the sun sets and hits the rain just right, making every shower of rain a drift of gold in the distance. There were things that had changed since Ed had fronted up at Garden Island to get on board his first ship, the *Jervis Bay*, all shiny and new in a uniform that didn’t fit him. Garden Island was pretty much the same, with the cranes still bulking up like stooping grey monsters over the ships, but a lot of the harbour had changed. Water taxis buzzed across it now, obnoxious little tributes to affluence and bad traffic, and jet-boats dragged tourists around to use up their pixels in photographs that usually showed fifty views of their thumb or them standing in front of an out-of-focus landmark.

They just don’t realise how big the whole thing is, Ed thought. They pointed their cameras at the Harbour Bridge from Circular Quay and were baffled that they couldn’t get it all in at once. They thought about San Francisco or New York or Hong Kong or Tokyo and didn’t realise that those harbours could fit into Sydney with room to spare. In Manly there was a monument that enshrined the old saying that it was ‘seven miles from Sydney and a thousand miles from care,’ and that was eleven

kilometres from Circular Quay to Manly Pier. The ferries still ploughed across from one to the other, green and cream monsters compared to the little pleasure boats; that was one thing that hadn't changed, for a hundred and fifty years, he thought.

As a kid, he'd loved it when they went across the harbour for a trip to Manly. Walk up from Rowntree Street to the bus stop in Darling, take the bus, belching diesel smoke, all the way in to Circular Quay and watch the ferry come in, water boiling up from its bow, ponderously slowing down and bumping gently into the great wooden pilings. The ship would strain at the huge brown ropes wound around the bollards, wringing water from them before it came to a complete halt, and there were always a few people who'd jump off it while it was still moving. The wooden gangplanks would rattle down to the deck and people surged off to their jobs, or to restaurants or to any of the other wonders of the city. Then Dad's hand, with the oil that he could never get rid of grained into it, would grab his and they'd get on board, with Mum bringing the picnic basket and the towels. Dad had been a machinist at the Cockatoo Island Dockyards, working all day inside the vast factory, and he loved to get out and see the ocean when he could.

Then there was the trip across the harbour, smooth at first until you got opposite the heads, then tossing up and surging for a few minutes, until they crossed the chop near Middle Head. Manly Pier in the distance, mooring and joining the others off the ferry down onto the pier, and then off up the Corso to the South Steyne beach. Summer days always seemed to last forever when he was a kid, Ed thought, and even then there was never enough time. Jump into the long, rolling breakers that came in from that infinite blue of the Pacific Ocean, walk out through them on a sandbar that seemed a mile long, and surf back in, again and again until he could hardly stand or move his arms. Ice-creams from the kiosk under the walkway as they sat on the sand, Dad in his Speedos looking like a rusty rug and Mum with a big hat over her face to keep it from burning, modest in a one-piece among the tiny bikinis on the other women. Sandwiches for lunch and read a book while they listened to the cricket on the radio, then back into the water until the evening. They'd get fish and chips from the shop on the Pier and eat them on the ferry back. He'd always collapse into bed early after those days, still feeling the movement of the waves, while Dad and Mum watched a bit of television and drank tea in the lounge.

"You're off with the fairies," Linda said.

He came back to the present and looked at her over the table. "I was just thinking about trips to Manly when I was a kid," he said.

Linda took a sip of her Riesling. "Must have been a fair hike from Balmain."

Ed nodded. "It was. We'd start straight after breakfast and come back in the dusk, sunburned and happy." He looked back out over the harbour, where the evening was deepening. "When you're a kid, you think those days are going to go on forever."

"Yeah," she reached over and patted his hand, "but there are compensations for growing up."

He smiled and took her hand in his. "Yeah, love, there are."

She laughed and said "Jesus, don't get totally sonky on me. I want to hear all the gossip about Madelyn and who's in the cast."

He picked up his beer and took a long pull on it while he thought about the answer. "She's tough as a nail, that's for sure. I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her, but I think she'll be okay to work with. She knows what she wants and she's not scared of making decisions."

"That's good. Nothing worse than a director that changes their mind all the time."

"She'll let you know what she wants and let you get on with the job, and you'll be okay if you give her just that, but I wouldn't expect praise."

"I can cope with that. What about the cast?"

"A few of the regulars, like Greg and Nicci. Claire's in, too; that TV deal must have bombed."

"Shit! Her and Nicci in the same dressing room is going to be fun. I like both of them, but they'll fight like cats in a sack."

Ed waved a hand at a waiter to get another beer. "I'll put them in separate dressing rooms. They'll behave themselves on stage."

"What about the rest?"

"There are couple of big names, Kevin Redmond's the biggest. Must be in between movies."

"Can he act? On screen he's just a handsome hunk."

Ed thanked the waiter who brought him the beer and then said, "We'll find out in a couple of weeks. Fortunately, that's not our concern."

The entrees arrived, oysters for Ed and chowder for Linda, and they ate in silence for a while. Ed pointed out the window at the dark harbour. A festival of lights was passing from left to right, going towards the Heads. "Passenger liner leaving," he said.

Linda turned her head to look at it.

"When I was a kid," he said, "I'd go down to Long-Nose Point and watch the ships come in and go out. They were all freighters or Navy ships. The liners docked at Circular Quay. I'd imagine them going off to other lands and all the things they'd see. I think that's what made me join the Navy."

"You're a romantic, my love, and you always have been . It's just as well you've got someone practical to look after you."

Ed raised his beer. "Here's looking at you then, kid."

"Yeah, yeah," Linda clinked her glass against his. "Humphrey Bogart you're not, love, but I guess I'll have to make do with you as is. Cheers; and here's to the show."

"Let's make it a good one."

CHAPTER THREE

There were, Ed Cahill thought, actors who were always on. Their whole lives were a performance. They could be difficult to live with and difficult to work with, particularly when they were method actors who were deep into their roles. Recent graduates from famous acting schools were the worst. They'd rant and scowl and wear clothes that looked just like their costumes everywhere, just to stay in character. What was it that Olivier had said to some actor who'd turned up claiming that he'd stayed up all night and run five miles to get ready for a film scene? Dustin Hoffman, wasn't it? "Well, if you'd ever learned to act, dear, you wouldn't have to go to so much trouble."

Then there were the actors who dropped the role as soon as they walked off the stage. One minute they'd be weeping their heart out or raging in anger, and then they'd dry the tears and ask you for a match for their fag. They were easier to work with, and a damned sight easier to live with on a long run. But, for the life of him, Ed didn't know which turned on the better performance. Fortunately, that was Madelyn's job.

"Y'know," she said, the inevitable cigarette in her hand, "you get the right cast, it's a dream. It's just that you never get the right cast." There was a mild acerbity in what she said, as if she had voiced the same sentiment over and over again to herself, but now she'd had to let it out to someone else. Ed felt flattered that it was him. They had come to respect each other a great deal over the course of the last couple of weeks. They shared a passion for organisation, for a start, and a love for the theatre. He suspected that she didn't open up to many people.

But that, he thought a little cynically, was part of the stage manager's job, to get people to trust him. The director had to trust him to get things done; the actors had to trust him to be there when there was a problem and to sort it out. He was the go-to person for any problem, discrete and capable of fixing it.

They were backstage, chatting with Mick, the chief mechanist. He was a lumpy Irishman who'd pulled ropes and pushed levers for forty years. Ed had wanted to check that the revolve was okay since they'd replaced some of the rollers. Madelyn had come with him. The cast were due in the theatre at ten. He suspected she was putting off the inevitable disappointment.

While Mick muttered under the machinery and got grease on his overalls, Ed said to Madelyn "How do you feel about this cast?"

She shrugged. "Don't know until I meet them. I've worked with a couple before, know some by reputation. When we've had a read-through, that's when I'll know if they're right."

Ed didn't say that he thought it was a little unusual that she hadn't cast the show herself. Everything about this show was a little unusual.

"There's only one person that worries me, right now," she continued. "Guess who."

Ed nodded. That would be Kevin Redmond, he thought. Big name in film and television, brought in by Mayne as a star lead. Ed didn't know his stage credits, and hadn't ever worked with him, but he was beautiful. Adonis crossed with Apollo.

Madelyn nodded in return. "I just hope he's not as fucking dumb as he looks on the screen."

Mick emerged. "She's runnin' sweet," he said in a brogue that had never left him since he migrated in the fifties. "Shouldn't make a sound and smooth as silk panties."

"It shouldn't be anywhere near full load, I hope, Ed said, and cocked a look over to Madelyn.

"Won't know until Marco gets here and gets the design finished. I sent him the stage layout and told him what I wanted. He's working on it on the way over here."

"Coo-ee people." Barry MacGuire's voice called down the stairwell. "The bus with the cast's arrived, dears."

"Put them into the seats on stage," Ed called back. "Madelyn wants us to sit in the auditorium."

"Okay, they'll be set up in five minutes."

Madelyn looked around. "Can we get out through the stage door from here?" she asked.

"There are stairs up from the dressing rooms."

"Good. Let's go out and come back in through the auditorium. Mick," she turned to the little mech, "we'll be in front of house. Give us a call on the intercom when they're all settled."

"Aye, I can do that."

"Leave the workers on, but tell Terry to bring down the house lights." She smiled thinly at Ed as she moved past to the stairs. "It's not only actors who have to make entrances."

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And make an entrance they did. They waited five minutes after the cast were on stage, and then Madelyn pulled open the double doors stage right in the house. It was a bright winter morning, and the sunlight glared down the aisle as she walked slowly towards the stage like Mephistophilis towards Faust. Ed trailed a few paces behind her like a devoted servitor, careful not to let his shadow

fall on her. *Christ, he thought, we must look like something out of a western. The gunslingers come in to clean up the town. Well, at least we'll be laying down the law.* They stopped about twelve rows back.

There was silence.

One of the actors rose from his chair. He could be called no other word than distinguished. Tall, with a mane of silver hair swept back from a noble brow above his craggy, handsome face, he was dressed in a dark suit that reeked of Bond Street and draped his body like a senatorial robe. He shaded his eyes. "Madelyn? Is that you?"

"Hey, Hank. How's it hanging?"

His accent was pure fruit. "In about the same place as last time, my darling. I thought I recognised that skinny-arsed walk as you came in. That's one mystery solved, at least. Neither this rent boy," he gestured with his thumb at Barry, "nor his master let on who would be directing this little panto." He bowed. "I'm glad it's you. I am suddenly filled with confidence."

"Yeah, well don't get drunk and don't chase little girls this time. It ruins your timing." She raised her voice. "For the rest of you, I'm Doctor Madelyn Vale, and I've directed every Shakespeare play ever written, most of them twice, I've won three Tonys, three Critics' Circle, an Obie, a Moliere and an Olivier. Most people think I can direct, and I'm one of them. I've worked with some of you before, and you know what to expect. I'll get the best performance from you that you've got if I have to rip it out with a chainsaw. Think of it as tough love. Any questions?"

Kevin Redmond stood up. His pale linen suit contrasted with his deep tan. "Madelyn . . ."

"It's Dr Vale. Hank gets to call me Madelyn because he's seen me drunk and naked. You haven't. What's your question?"

"Ah, Dr Vale, it's a privilege to work with you . . ."

"Yeah, it is. What's the question, Redmond?"

"Uh, what's the play?"

Madelyn was utterly motionless for a second, and then she cupped her hands to her mouth in a megaphone and yelled "MacGuire!"

Barry rushed to the front of the stage, his arms full of thick envelopes. "Yes, Dr Vale?"

"What the hell is going on? Why don't these people have scripts?"

“None of them has a full script, only a part from another play that they read for their audition for Mr Mayne. We’re trying to keep the cat in the bag.”

“Well, let the cat out of the fucking bag right now. How much do you know, people? Hank?”

“I thought it was a revival of one of the history plays, dear. Dick Two, perhaps. It was his little speech that I read for the audition.”

“Yeah, my agent said it was a Shakespeare thing,” Redmond said. Others made assenting murmurs.

“Holy shit. A Shakespeare thing.” She shook her head slowly in disbelief. “Yeah. You tell them, Barry, and I’ll just sit down here where I can watch this.” She took a seat, twelfth row centre, and Ed sat beside her. “Pretend you’re taking notes,” she muttered to him from the side of her mouth. He dutifully took a large pad and a pencil from the satchel he carried.

MacGuire held one hand up, balancing envelopes in the other. “Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Mayne is putting on a production, the first production ever, of a newly discovered play, Shakespeare’s *Henry VII*.” Most of the actors reacted to this. Redmond did not. “The production has been kept hush-hush to maximise its impact. It is, indeed, a historic occasion, and I do not have to tell you of its magnitude. This is a play written in Shakespeare’s own hand, and its provenance is indubitable. When it opens . . .”

“Which it’s never going to do if you don’t get on with it,” Madelyn yelled. “Give them the fucking scripts!”

Barry sniffed and tossed his head. “I have here full scripts with your names on them, and the parts you are intended to play highlighted.” He began to hand them out. “We will all be staying at the same accommodation, which is a pleasant little place in Balmain, and we will all be working in the same rehearsal space. Everyone is called for every day of rehearsal, without exception. If you would take these upstairs to the green room with you and . . .”

“Fuck that for a joke,” Madelyn called out. “You’ve got the scripts, that’s a stage, I’m the director. Let’s have a nice cold read of the play. Then you can go home. C’mon people,” she clapped her hands a few times. “Let’s get on the horse. Cold read or not, get some character into it.”

The people on stage shuffled their scripts out of the envelopes and flipped through them quickly.

“C’mon, who’s got the first line.” Madelyn clapped her hands again. “Let’s go.”

A short man in jeans and a yellow jumper put up his hand. Ed recognised him as Greg Mansfield, someone he'd worked with in Melbourne a few years ago. A good, solid actor who'd never quite got the part to make him a star. "I think it's me, Dr Vale," he said.

"Well, let's hear it."

"Okay."

"The rest of you just try to keep up."

Mansfield spoke in a clear, resonant voice that filled the auditorium. "Well met, Sir Roland. Is the king about?"

Redmond got up from his chair and walked to centre front. He struck a pose with his right hand extended. "He's, ah, no. He is, my lord. He keeps his coat within." He walked back and sat down.

Resoundingly sotto voce, Henry Stringfellow whispered, "I think that might be 'he keeps his court,' darling."

"Oh, yeah," grinned Redmond.

"Oh, Christ," groaned Madelyn.

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The bar was a dark, subterranean enclave Barry had led them to, halfway up Oxford Street. It seemed to be left over from the fifties, and nothing had changed since then. A piano was being played softly by a man who seemed uninterested in the world around him except when that world put tips in the Napoleon on top of the polished black wood. He'd flash the donor a cool smile for a moment, then retreat to Bill Evans or Joe Albany. It had the musk of cigarettes and martini-olives, dim lighting that gave it the look of old temples of decadence and the Rat Pack.

There was a mojito in front of Madelyn Vale. She looked as if she'd been sucking the limes it was made from.

Ed sipped a beer and listened to Barry as he tried to explain the presence of Kevin Redmond in the cast.

"Mr Mayne wants him for audience appeal," he said.

Madelyn sat silent.

“He’s a little worried that the play might be too esoteric to get the attention it deserves from the public. He knows it’s going to get enormous attention from critics and academics, but he wants it to appeal to the man in the street.”

Madelyn moved. She lifted her drink and sipped it. She put it down.

“You’ve got to admit, he’s a big star; he’ll draw crowds and get publicity.”

Madelyn took the damp coaster from under her drink and began to tear tiny little pieces from it. “This is one of the biggest events in the history of theatre, and he wants a moron to play a lead role. Roland is Henry’s bastard son, and he’s supposed to be sly, intelligent and unscrupulous, like Edmund in *Lear*. Redmond plays him like *Rain Man*. He has a y’all Texas accent and when he tries to be English he sounds like he’s got a carrot up his arse. He has a vocabulary of six words, and he doesn’t understand three of them. He almost had to be tied to the chair to stop him searching for the spotlight.” By this time she had a small mound of coaster pieces in front of her. She took another sip of mojito to clear her throat. “The publicity we’re going to get is going to say that they can hear the body of William Shakespeare revolving in its grave at Holy Trinity all the way down here in Australia. They will tear us apart, burn us, and spit on the ashes. Fire him.”

“We can’t.”

“Why?”

Barry sighed and picked up his chilli vodka and coriander martini. “For all his faults as a performer, Kevin has one singular talent; he can pick agents. His agent is a contractual Godzilla with the brain of Perry Mason and the morals of Cesare Borgia. He negotiated a contract that is so watertight it could have saved the *Titanic*. Simply put, the show doesn’t go on without Kevin, unless he is too ill to make it onto the stage.”

“Ed,” she said, “know any hit men?”

Before Ed could reply she held up her hand. “Don’t tell me; I might be tempted.”

“And there is another reason,” Barry said. He sipped his drink. “Redmond is working for free. It was made clear to him and his manager that there was no money to pay him his star salary, and that all we could offer was Equity minimum. That was such a pittance, compared to his ordinary salary, that he waived it. That gives us a little more money to play with.”

She ran her hand through her hair. “What if he walks?”

“You’d have to find someone to replace him, and they would have to sign the same contract as the others; non-disclosure, attendance at all rehearsals, etc.”

“Understudies. We need at least two, one for the men and one for the women. I should have thought of it before.”

“Then, if Kevin decides that he would rather pursue other ventures, and an understudy was available to take his place, I can’t see any objection. Mr Mayne might not like to lose his . . .”

“Babe magnet,” Madelyn supplied.

“Yes, but he wouldn’t have a great deal of choice if you also wanted him to go.”

“I think he might come to have reservations about continuing with the production,” she said, with a feral glint in her eye.

Ed said “You can’t make it obvious. He could go to the union. Hell, he could close the show.”

“How?”

“It’s happened before in Australia. Frank Sinatra had to apologise to a journalist, I think it was, before union members would work his show over here. It was a while ago, but we couldn’t go on if the mechs pulled out, or the front of house.”

“I won’t be any harder on him than I am on the others. I don’t think he’s got the balls for it, though.”

“He might surprise you,” Barry said. “He talked to me on the way back to the hotel. He went quite misty-eyed at the thought of performing in a lost Shakespeare play, after someone had explained what *Henry VII* was, particularly with you as director. Apparently, you directed his mother once. She still talks about it.”

“What? Who was his mother?”

“Anna Finklestein.”

“Never heard of her.”

“Stage name Ariel Golder.”

“She was his mother? Hell, she was *good*. That was when I was just starting out. An off-Broadway *Macbeth*. She played the bitch beautifully.”

“It must have had something to do with your direction,” Barry muttered under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing. She married a Hollywood producer, changed her name again and made a fortune in disaster movies. Ariel Redmond, star of *Hellball*, *Deep Fall*, *Pillar of Ice*, *Crack in the Land* and a host of others. She’s retired now.”

“Ariel Golder,” Madelyn mused. “She was really good. The boy’s got acting genes, at least. Maybe. Just maybe.” She came out of her reverie. “But we need understudies, anyway. Ed?”

“I can think of a few.”

“Make a list. They have to be the best we can get.”

“And ones who will work cheap,” Barry chipped in.

Ed raised his beer. “Consider it done.”

The pianist segued into Miles Davis’ *All Blues*.

OoO

Ed walked with Barry back to his house, down through the stews of Darlington and Surry Hills. Shops littered the sides of the road, but down the back alleys and lanes the twee little terrace houses, redecorated in exquisite taste with water-washed pebble floors and hanging lampshades, pined away, waiting for the seventies to come back. Ed wondered if the little working-man’s café was still there in Foley Street, where you used to be able to get the special of the day for ten bucks for three courses; usually soup, sausages and trifle. A little way up the road in Crown Street, you could go to The Bentley, and pay more than that for three oysters. Surry Hills used to be a rag-end place, dangerous back in the old days when the brothels and sly grog shops were hidden among the run-down terrace houses. All that changed in the sixties, when people began to realise that it was even closer to the city than Paddington, and half the price. It became a centre for gay nightlife, with places like Ivy’s lighting up the night, and the Mardi Gras changed it even further.

Ed had worked on one of the theatre acts for the Mardi Gras, a review down at the Seymour Centre, a few years after he left the navy. It was a confection of acid wit and pink tulle, scathing parodies of Fred Nile and other political opponents. There’d been frou-frou, and chichi and every other fashion statement they could get away with, but behind all the dears, darlings and fuck-you attitude, there was just a little hint of sadness, and more than a hint of bitter anger. There were people in the show who could remember back to the days when homosexuality had been illegal, when beating up poofers was a blood sport. They had a lot of guts, along with a wide range of sequins and feather boas.

They cut down through Pelican to get to Goulburn and on down to Cooper Street, where Barry lived. Ed could go on to Central Station. There was no train out to Glebe, but he could catch a bus there, or just walk on up Broadway to Glebe Point Rd and to the hotel. It was a Thursday night, cold and clear, and there weren't many people around. Ed liked it like this, when he wanted to think. That's why he'd started walking with Barry, instead of catching a cab. These lonely streets, with their made-over terrace houses mingled with factories, the sound of trains coming into Central from the suburbs and the country, they were good for pondering, sorting things out. He'd liked night watches in the Navy for the same reason. Just you and the ship and the sea, with the stars looking down. Not many stars to be seen here, he thought. The air pollution gets bad in winter. Too many cars, too many people, too fast.

Barry was unusually quiet as they walked. Ed supposed he had things to think about, too. He had on a camel-coloured cashmere coat and a dark blue fedora, looking like an extra in an old Bogart movie, *The Big Sleep* or *The Maltese Falcon*, maybe. He suddenly said, "That's my place, up ahead." He pointed to one of the old three-storey terraces that lined the street, with a tiny front yard and an overhanging balcony. A street light showed bright flowers in pots on the gravel of the yard, and a deep green front door with a polished brass knocker in the shape of a mermaid. Barry put the key in the door and paused before he opened it. "Would you like a coffee or something?" he asked.

Ed shook his head. "It's getting late; I'd better get back to the hotel. I've got to start calling potential understudies tomorrow."

"Thanks for walking back with me," Barry said. "I've lived here for thirty years, but I still get a bit worried sometimes late at night."

Ed looked up and down the dark street. They were alone, and it struck him that maybe Surry Hills could still be a dangerous place, once you got away from the bright lights and people. "That's okay." He waved a hand at the house. "Nice place," he said. "These old terraces are worth a bomb, now. We looked at the prices a few years ago, and they convinced us that we'd have to buy in the suburbs, if we ever did." *But that was when Linda and I still had itchy feet, and there was that show in Spain, and after that there was Austria, and the urge to stay put for a while just sort of wandered away*, he thought.

"Oh, god yes," Barry said, and shook his head, then looked up at the house. "I could make a fortune if I wanted to sell it, but I can't. It was an inheritance."

"Favourite uncle?"

Barry's voice was soft. "No. My partner. It was his house. He died twelve years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Ed said.

"I could never sell it, even though it costs a bloody fortune to keep up. You know what these old houses are like." He sighed and turned a brittle smile on Ed. "Somewhat like this old body, which seems to continually need a bit of work, these days."

"Happens to us all, Barry."

Barry looked at the door and stroked it with his gloved hand. "I still think there's something of him in here. He chose that doorknocker, found it in a little shop in Crete when we were on holiday there, and bargained with the shopkeeper outrageously. We worked out later that an hour of his time had saved us a little over a dollar, and pissed ourselves laughing. Those were good times."

"The best memories," Ed said.

"His name was Murray, and he was a lawyer," Barry said. "Very successful. Camp as a row of tents and did a lot of business with the gay crowd. We met at Randwick Race Course, of all places. I was managing some function for a business crowd, helping out by passing around the cucumber sandwiches, and he saw me. It was love at first canapé." He sighed. "He had pots of money, and lavished gifts on me, star-struck little boy that I was then. Sometimes I think he may have given me a little too much of a taste for luxury."

Ed sensed that Barry wanted to say more. He said, "What happened?"

Barry turned to him, and the artificial smile was back. "Oh, we lived together in unmarried bliss for nearly twenty years, and then he got a little bit too pissed at a party up in Maroubra, of all places. He decided, very sensibly, to catch a cab home instead of walking. I was working a show down at the Independent. He was waiting at the side of the road for the cab he'd called when a car full of yobs drove by. They abused him for standing outside the house of a gay man. Apparently, he ignored them, so they drove back and abused him again. He turned around to walk back to his friend's house, and one of them threw a stubby at him." Barry's smile quivered a little. "You know, just one of those little bogan gestures of camaraderie. It hit him just under the base of the skull and he was dead before he hit the ground. They told the police they hadn't meant it, they were just having a bit of fun." His head dropped and he looked at his watch. "Oh, heavens, look at the time. Linda will be thinking you've changed your orientation." He looked back up. "Thanks again."

"No worries, mate."

Barry gave a little wave of his hand and went inside. Ed walked on down to Central Station and caught a cab home.

PREFACE TO RICHARD III

My dearest Lord, this play has no dedication, since it is not worthy of one, and my falsity in playing it is bounded only by my cupidity in retaining it in my meagre corpus. Yet, with humble esteem, I think it one of the better-written plays of my earliest days of writing, truly my majority as a scribbler of plays, and one which, with modesty, I believe enjoyed a deserved popularity with the ever-gentle mob. If there were not stories within stories in this rough history of England, if there were not secrets long-held, and lovely fools to spout them, I might have loved this little work yet, although I do not loathe it, instead of it causing the bitter sadness of wrecks upon a frosty shore, hard worn by spray and spume and rocks, as they lie betimes in the great north of this sorry world, angels in ice, carved by the bluster of wind.

I thought it grand, and in my humour showed it to Kit, who read it and touched his nose and nodded, as if to say it were a play well-done, but incomplete or faulty in some way. He asked me what my sources were for this fine fabric of entertainment, what had led me to this cumbludgeon of airiness, and I bridled at what I thought was the don looking down at the glover's son. I told him that the Lives of Kings was a fine friend for those who would write on that subject, fair and truthful, accurate to a fault, and he smiled as if a pupil had drawn a cat on a slate, all angles and lines and modelled on a fantasy, not one whit like the puss, but well-drawn, at all. To which smile I must throw forward the work of good Sir Thomas More, in his history of the dread usurper, at which Kit laughed outright and bade me cast no more books at him, unless they were chosen more for their honesty. Then through his laughter, seeing that my lips had firmed in a scowl, he bade me listen to a tale, and such a tale, that had I then had wisdom, foresight or courage I would have torn the pages I had scribbled to scraps and rags, and written a truer few words, but it remained, and I needed a play for The Curtain, and the Lord Chamberlain's Men were hungry for words to speak to earn their, and my, bread, so the lies were left unmolested, even as Kit educated me.

His tale blasted my ears with truth, and showed much of his own, strange history, and, my dearest lord, revealed why he lay so much in your affections. He had been at Cambridge, he said, when a problem arose around his lust for a young lad, a stripling of but twelve summers, who was sent to St John's while Kit was beginning his Master's degree by Lord Burghley, his guardian. Kit's fascination with the lad brought him to Burghley's attention, and he disapproved, so much so that he was about to have Kit arrested, when Lord Walsingham intervened, because he saw that a young man of Kit's wit and beauty, not to mention his daring demeanour, could be of value to him in his trade of spying out the Queen's enemies. Kit told me this and was wistful for what could have been, but you were just a boy, and what would come, would come betimes, when you had grown, and 'twas best for you to spend your time in growth to become the man your lineage promised. In short, Walsingham blackmailed him for buggery, made him his creature and drew him away from you, as Burghley

desired to guard your virtue, and sent him on excursions to other lands, where his devil-may-care demesne made him friends and gained him access to places where his careful observation of the world could lead him even further and deeper to secrets. He was Walsingham's pet spy, who could be held on a leash by his past exercises in a love which could not be but condign.

Walsingham did not know him, this Christopher Marlowe who would turn his table around to feed at the better end, and underestimated both his wit and his daring. He sent Kit on a delicate mission of discovery, where he was to trace certain families, their children and history, in memory and in local knowledge, for a purpose Kit did not know, but formed an opinion of as his subtle questions showed more of the world, and in particular of a Portugese family, noble and long-trusted allies of the House of Buckingham, bonded by blood through long ago marriage and shared loves, who had extensive properties on Madeira and the Azores. They had been given custody of two boys by Lord Buckingham, with the admonition that their lives were to be kept secret from that point on, never to be revealed unless Buckingham or an heir should call for them. This was enough for Kit to surmise that the boys, long dead, had been spirited from the Tower. A dangerous knowledge, but one that, played well, would be currency to Trade to Walsingham for protection.

The true history of Richard the Third of England was that he did not order the death of princes, nor was he a twisted monster, and his tragedy was not that of a downfall through evil, but losing the great game of kings. I had written the former, believing More, and now I would not write the latter, for fear of ridicule and royal vengeance. I did not have, nor did Kit reveal to me, the name of the family, not whether there were heirs. He said it was no matter, now that Walsingham was dead and your own past-guardian, Burghley, was in his role.

I feared for Kit, his outrageous ways and unmending contempt so obvious, and his protector gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Terry enjoyed setting lights. He thought being a lighting man was to be an artist, to paint in light the way that a set designer painted on cloth. Currently, he had the house and the stage black while they sorted through some lighting plots in the bio box. The only light was a soft glow from the stairwell that painted a faded yellow feather onto the white plaster of the cyclorama. It lent the hall a cathedral air, as if the brush-stroke of light was a sign of immanence, an expectation of some sort of epiphany that would take place there soon.

"I replaced about half of the old lamps," Terry said to Ed Cahill. "They were in pretty good condition, considering, but anything where the wiring looked a bit ratty got tossed. I've replaced all the bulbs, checked all the lines and taken the board apart and cleaned it. Again, it's in great condition for its age. Y'know," he stretched his lanky frame out and patted the board, "I think I really do prefer Betty to a computerised board."

"Betty?"

"Oh, yeah; you have to name your board. It's like cars; they have personalities, little quirks, and if you want them to work for you, you have to find out all about them."

"So what's Betty like?"

Terry ran a couple of slides up and down with his fingers. "We're just getting to know each other," he said. "So far, she's been smooth and sweet, like a lady in satin panties. Remember that show we did in a community theatre in Goulburn?"

"Yeah. *Reedy River*, one of my least favourite shows."

"They'd spent some money up in the box there, and they had spent their government grant on a brand new Lightronics rig, all set up and ready to go. Beautiful thing; far too big for the hall. That one was Cthulhu."

"Cthulhu?"

"Yeah, the demon god from Lovecraft. It did everything but electrocute me. It switched patches, re-set times, crossed effects and died when I took it to manual."

"But the lights worked, we got the show on."

“I swore I’d piss into it if it didn’t co-operate, and that seemed to calm it down. Still fractious, even on the last night.”

“I was glad that show was only a week.”

“Why?”

Ed considered for a second. “It’s a dead man’s show. It’s like *Guys and Dolls*. The one that everybody puts on when they’ve run out of ideas, full of ghosts of every other production that’s ever been, dead men walking through the set. Absolutely safe because the audience rolls up for one last spoonful of nostalgia.”

“That’s a bit harsh.”

“Maybe. Sometimes you just get feelings about shows.”

Terry picked up a purple gel and looked at it critically. “So, what’s your feeling about this one?” he said.

Ed studied the poster of Glenda Jackson in *Hedda Gabler*. “Jury’s still out. Madelyn’s good to work with, after you get past the barbed wire. Can’t really tell about the cast yet. They’re pretty much a pick-up cast, all working for the minimum. We were lucky to get some of them. Others, well they’ll be competent when Maddy gets through with them. Except, maybe for Redmond.” He looked around the bio box, with its white-washed walls and the posters that had been carefully replaced in their original positions. It was starting to feel like a part of home. “I like the theatre,” he said, cocking a thumb at the darkness behind him. “She’s like a stately old spinster who can still kick up her heels, given the right music.”

“Shh!” Terry said, holding up a hand. They listened. “Speaking of music . . .”

The sound of someone singing drifted up from the stage. “*One boy, boy for sale, he’s going cheap, only seven guineas. That, or thereabouts.*”

Ed looked out of the box, down to the stage. There was a man down there, outlined by the light on the back wall, singing Bumble’s great solo from *Oliver*. “Terry, can you bring up a spot on down centre?”

“Sure.” Terry switched on the board. “What would you like?”

“Anything with an amber gel in?”

Terry nodded.

“Bring it up slowly until I tell you to stop.”

The light slowly brightened to reveal Henry Stringfellow in full song. It stopped when the light was still golden. Henry finished the song and took a deep bow, one arm out, one arm folded across his heart. He waved to them. “I thought I was alone here,” he called, his resonant baritone carrying easily up to the box.

Ed switched on the box mike for the PA system. “So did we. I thought everyone was supposed to be back at the house?”

“Oh, I wriggled out of going back. Closed doors and ingénues always make me nervous, and they don’t have any decent scotch in the bloody place. I told Maddy I’d stay behind for a little while to get to know the house and she gave me her key. She seems to trust me, although Barry took my script with him in that twee little briefcase he has, apparently to lock it away.” He shaded his eyes. “Come on down. Have a tot of Lagavulin with me. We’ll christen this bloody stage.”

Ed switched off the mike. “Coming?” he asked.

Terry shook his head. “I’ll tidy up in here first. I’ll come down when I’ve done that.”

“Can you leave that spot on? It looks good.”

Brings the stage alive, he thought as he made his way down into the auditorium and up to the stage. Nothing worse than a dark theatre, and this one had been dark for a long time. Some theatres went grim and dour after they were dark for a while; not this one. There was a familiar tension in the air, an expectancy, as if the whole building was rousing itself from a torpor, getting ready to fulfil its purpose; to put on a play. That one amber spot on Henry as he sat on the apron already looked like a performance.

Henry took a silver flask from his jacket as Ed approached. “This should, of course, be wine,” he said. “The eternal link between Dionysus and theatre, fuelled by wine, women and song, although the women are not here, and I’m damned if I’ll spill a tot of this on the ground. Theatre; the festival of the senses, then out in the open air, now in these walls, which have truly remarkable acoustics, if you’ve noticed.”

Ed sat on the apron next to him. “I’ll take your word for it. You sang that pretty well.”

Henry took a swig from the flask and passed it over to Ed. “It’s not quite ambrosia, but it’s close enough for the Scots. I’ve been in that show three times, man and boy. First I was the Dodger, in a West End production, in between school and Oxford, then Fagin on Broadway a decade later, then,

just a few years ago, Bumble in San Francisco. I'm not quite tenor enough to get that top A without something of a stretch, but tight jocks and a sharp stick help."

Ed laughed and took a sip. "Here's to *Oliver*, then."

"*Oliver*, indeed." Henry took back the flask and drank a contemplative nip. He gestured towards the dark auditorium, packed with possibility. "And to Willy, who's given us a chance to do great things. To make another dream."

"We are such stuff as dreams are made of," Ed quoted.

"Yes, indeed. But our little lives are not really ended with a sleep. They go on, to another opening and another show, to slightly mutilate the song."

They sat in companionable silence for a while, looking out from the light to the dark. Ed was thinking of other productions, other times, other theatres that had formed his life for the last twenty years.

"How did *you* get into all this?" Henry asked, with a sweeping gesture that included the whole theatre. "I mean, you don't seem to be gay or utterly up yourself, and Maddy thinks highly of you."

"She does?"

"Oh yes. She was having a quiet word with me and she mentioned that you didn't seem to be a complete wanker. High praise, indeed."

Ed laughed. "I guess it is." He looked at the darkness again. "I was in the navy, joined after I left school, and got into engineering. I spent time on shore establishments and they ran a show at the base where I was stationed. It was one of those Christmas pantomimes where rugby players dress up in crinoline and wear make-up for a laugh. The commander put me in charge of managing it, and I did a pretty good job if it, if I say so myself. I enjoyed it, as well. I got out not long after, I was at a loose end, and I saw an ad for a stage hand with a company in Newcastle. I got the job, and then they offered me ASM for the next show. When the resident manager took off for greener pastures, they offered me his job. He was right to run, because the company folded after another two shows, but by that time I had a reputation for making shows run on time and in time, and I've had work ever since."

"There must be more to it than that."

Ed considered. "I like the people, I like the travel, I like the shows. I like to be involved in . . . making something." A little more than that, he thought to himself; I love it because there's something miraculous about it, every show.

Henry took another sip and passed the flask. “And the actors don’t drive you mad? The prima donnas and drama queens? The petty rivalries, the stabs in the back, the bitchiness?”

Ed laughed again. “It’s hard to put up with, sometimes, but it all works out. The show goes on.”

“That it does. The driving principle of the stage. The show must go on.” He sighed. “I’ve been in the theatre all my life, but for me it began as a hobby, something in which I could dabble while I trained to be a barrister. However, soon the hobby took over, and the law died away. I meandered into it, as I suspect I’ve meandered into most things in my life. But it fascinates me. I drifted into theatre, you came into it as a profession, Redmond inherited it, and dear Maddy was driven into it.”

“Driven?”

Henry turned and looked at him quizzically. “I suppose the back story on Dr Madelyn Vale, PhD summa cum laude from Columbia, is not terribly well known. She doesn’t make a point of giving background, and she shuns reporters.”

“What’s the story?”

Henry ruminated for a moment. “Since you’re not a *complete* wanker, I can fill in some of it, and I don’t think Maddy would mind.” He regained the flask and took another contemplative sip. “Vale isn’t her birth name. It’s Wall, a good Catholic name from a very good Catholic family. She was destined to be a nun, sent to a convent school, one of the stricter ones, where I still think they practise the bastinado on the naughty girls. They wanted her to be a cloistered Carmelite, and she was to be sent into the convent when she was fifteen, as an aspirant. It didn’t take.”

“What happened?”

“They lived in Brooklyn, near the docks, and her father worked on the waterfront. She had to travel up to the Cathedral School of St John the Divine for instruction, way up near Harlem. She used to see the students from Columbia on their way, and one day there was a big group of them walking up together. She was curious, so she followed them. They were going to an outdoor performance by the King’s Crown Shakespeare Group from the university, an annual occurrence on the steps of the Low Library. It was *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the most magical of Willy’s plays. She stayed for the whole thing, when she should have been heading home to say her prayers. She went back with stars in her eyes, to a drunken father who called her a whore and smacked her black and blue, a mother who wept and asked what the pope would think, and seven siblings who cowered away from it all.”

He took another drink.

“Picture it; she’s come home with a head full of dreams to a house where they want to destroy those dreams because they’re blasphemous. Her father kicks her down the stairs, her mother prays for her to an icon of the bleeding heart, but won’t turn around to face her daughter. Her brothers and sisters are too scared to help, and all she can see is a future that she doesn’t want, a future filled with poverty, chastity and obedience, in a religion that will excuse her father after a few Hail Marys for beating his child. Indeed, she realised, the priest might even say that she deserved it for straying from the path of faith. All this after she’s just had her heart lifted to the skies, after Puck’s told her that it really is possible to dream and for it not to be a sin.”

“What did she do?”

“She ran from that Brooklyn house back to Manhattan, and went back to Columbia. This was in the bad old days, when New York was a dangerous place. She knew that, and she didn’t care. Perhaps God, or a god, smiled on her that night, because she was found not by a dope dealer or a pimp, but by Jorge Ortega, a Hispanic man who was a cleaner at Columbia. He took her back to his family, down past East 113th Street, where it turns into Our Lady Queen of Angels. Then she dropped off the radar.”

Ed took the flask back. “Sounds like she did it hard,” he said.

“She re-emerged after graduating from a local high school with a new name and winning a scholarship to Columbia. In fact, she’d won scholarships to all sorts of places, but it was Columbia she wanted. From her first year there, she practically ran the drama club. By her third year, she was directing off-Broadway plays, experimental theatre in the boonies in the summer break. She went straight into the doctoral programme and got an exchange to Oxford for a year. That’s where I met her. We’ve worked together half a dozen times since.”

“Did she get back in touch with her family?”

“No,” he said quietly, “not once. But I did. Subtly, through some friends. Her parents are dead, one brother’s a cop, and another one’s a priest. One was in the Marines and died in a ‘plane crash. One sister became the nun she was supposed to be, the other three are married with many children. I told her. She just walked away. Never mentioned it again.”

Ed shook his head. “She’s tough.”

“Oh, no; you mistake her façade for her self. She learned to look tough when she was on the streets of Spanish Harlem, where the gang wars could kill one of your friends each week. The Ortegas raised her right, and supported her as much as they could, but they couldn’t protect her from Harlem.” He took another drink. “They were both killed in a convenience store robbery, a week after she graduated with her bachelor’s degree, in ‘85. She was in Skowhegan, Maine, doing some work with

the School of Art designing scenery for a production of Hal V. She came back for the funeral, and then went back up to finish her work. The show was due to go up in three weeks.”

“Yeah. The show must go on.” Ed felt sad for Maddy, but there were tales like that for just about every person who ever worked on stage. The proudest boast an actor could make was that they’d never missed a performance. He’d seen them perform after surgery, drunk, with broken ankles, after divorces, births and deaths. Once he’d even seen an actor play Estragon when he was wanted by the police for fraud and the cops were asking questions in the foyer. Crew and production as well. He’d worked a Simon Grey show when the director had to be wheeled in in a chair, dying of cancer. He’d survived a couple of months past the opening. Terry had worked a board with concussion and a broken wrist after he’d fallen off a ladder. Linda had finished sewing costumes by hand in a blackout that lasted for two days in a little town up the back end of northern NSW.

“It must be said that she has made sacrifices for her art, and she expects the same of all who work with her.” Henry gave a slightly bitter smile. “She gave up god and family for Shakespeare, pretty much gave up everything else, as well. However, she’s not the bitch she pretends to be. She directs with a sensitivity that would be unavailable to a true bitch. She can play an audience like a virtuoso pianist; laughter, tears, rage, love. She can bring the most unlikely performances from equally unlikely actors. Even such tatty remains of a thespian as myself.”

“No men in her life?”

“Oh, there have been, and one or two women, as well. They all wind up savaged by the experience, and leave shaken after a little while.”

“You?”

Henry’s laugh boomed out into the house. “Oh, dear me, no. I’m several years older than her, for a start, and I prefer to stand further from the flame. We are friends, and have been since we met. I was doing some horrible little thing for the review, and she was directing a Moliere for the dramatic society. She dropped in to see my show and we met at the bar afterwards. She spent two hours telling me every single thing I’d done wrong, and how it could be improved. When she’d finished, and the bar was closing, I tipped my last drink of the night, a pint of Harper’s, down her cleavage as a thank you and stalked out in high dudgeon. Unfortunately, she was utterly correct in her comments, and when all her suggestions worked I bought her a carton of Mumm to apologise. I sent along an offer to stand in the Magdalen quadrangle, stripped to my BVDs, and remain rigidly at attention while she threw a custard pie at me.”

“Did she accept the apology?”

“Yes, but she put a bloody apple in the custard pie.”

It was Ed’s turn to laugh.

“After that, when she graduated and came back to England looking for work, I financed her first show. *As You Like It*, and there wasn’t a dry eye in the house after Jacques’s speech. It made a fortune and went into an extended run. I wound up making a tidy profit.”

“You financed it?”

Henry looked directly at him. “You don’t imagine I do this for a living?” He chuckled and shook his head. “I am a descendant of what could be called old money, so bloody old that it’s taken on a life of its own. The Stringfellows were listed in the Domesday Book, and we’ve been quietly amassing cash ever since. Mostly by the old traditional ways of slavery, pillage and piracy, albeit disguised by fancy words. I was, as I said, to be a barrister, and continue the tradition of bugging the unsuspecting public and bamboozling the bewildered company, but I wound up thinking it was a lot of hot cock and took the first stage out of town, which happened to be the Leeds Town Hall as a spear carrier in a doubtful production of *‘Tis a Pity She’s a Whore*. I idled my way through Oxford taking time out to play any part that I could, which meant it took me a very long time to get my degree. They were quite understanding about it, not wanting to kick the younger brother of a baron out on his arse.”

“Baron?”

“Yes, my unfortunate brother is Michael Stringfellow, Baron Fiske. He runs the family companies and goes out hunting and fishing. I wish him well of it. I am, as it were, a silent, very silent, partner in his endeavours.”

“Should I call you lord something?”

“God, no. If Mike kicks off before I do, his son will inherit the title. Even though the class structure of England is something of which I have taken advantage at times, I’m ashamed to say, I think it would be better if the lot of them were kicked out on their collective bottoms.”

Terry’s voice came through on the house PA. “I’m going to shut down the board now. Do you want to turn the workers on from down there?”

Ed waved at the bio box and went to the wings. For one brief moment the house was utterly dark, then the fluorescent lights came on and the stage was a workplace, not a place where secrets were traded. Henry still sat on the edge of the stage, gazing out into the darkness of the house as if he would make it his. He said quietly “Another six weeks and we go up. God help us if we’re not ready.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Madelyn had asked Ed to find an understudy for Kevin Redmond, and he'd made a few calls. Leon Taylor had been delighted to hear from him, and was between jobs, "resting." He came in early, to read for the part.

"Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate: *fine word -- legitimate!*
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate. I grow, I prosper!
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!"

The speech from *Lear* was beautiful; full of bitchy venom, but full of strength, as well. Madelyn gave a brief nod, as if to say 'Okay, it's a start,' and then strolled down to the stage. She handed him up a typed sheet.

"Try that. Take a couple of minutes to read through. Do it like he's Edmund." She walked back to her seat in the twelfth row and sat back down.

Leon spent a few minutes reading, moving his lips as he did and making small gestures with his free hand. He closed his eyes for a second or two, opened them and then nodded to Madelyn.

“The people call him king, and I’m his son,
But not his son, he bears another name,
And Arthur would be king when Henry’s gone,
The son of law, if not the son of love.
The whelp of England, not the get of France.
But, Arthur, you are born the sickly heir.
The air of England does not do you well.
And Henry, younger still and bolder still,
A very plague of risks you daily take.
Young Arthur’s all but dead in Ludlow Keep,
Ah, blessed pox that cares for bastards so,
It takes away the pits that mar their path.
For Henry? There are other, deeper, pits
On hunts that horses often stumble o’er.
Wherefore should Henry never stumble too?
Who’s left? Sir Roland, bastard, son and heir,
With all these bloody roses pruned and gone,
Now to be made the heir legitimate.”

The character had emerged from the first words. A villain, for sure; sly, vengeful, ambitious. A hint of stoop to the shoulders, as if concealing something, and the speech delivered slightly sidewise to the audience, as if sharing a somewhat dirty secret. Leon had taken inches from his height by changing his posture, and tossed his lank black hair forward to cast his face into shadow, except for the eyes, that glinted out like those of an animal in hiding. Ed found it difficult not to applaud. He’d known Leon for years, ever since he’d been acting in student shows at uni. Through thick and thin.

“You didn’t read it,” Madelyn called out.

Leon blinked a few times and looked down at her from the stage. "I knew it," he said.

"That fast?"

"I've always been a quick study. Got me lots of radio commercials, that." Ed knew what he meant. Studio time was money, and the people who could pick up a script and read it perfectly the first time, particularly if they could read exactly to length, were never out of work.

"Yeah, well this isn't radio, Toto. Okay, you've got the part."

"Oh, good, I'll open the Moet. What part? This doesn't come from any play I know."

Madelyn looked at her watch and turned to Barry MacGuire beside her. "Marco gets in today, and I want to meet him. Fill Taylor in and get the contracts signed, will you?" she got up from her seat and headed towards the exit. "Ed," she called, "can I see you for a minute?"

Out in the foyer, Madelyn finished making a call on her mobile phone and asked "Okay, what's his problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on; he's good looking but not so handsome that he's a stereotypic lead. He's a quick study, he gets straight into the part, and he can act. So why's he out of work?"

"We were lucky?"

"Not that lucky. Come on."

Ed took a deep breath. "He has a little problem with women."

Madelyn took out a cigarette and lit it. "Go on."

"He'll fuck any woman in sight and if there isn't one in sight he'll go looking for one. Doesn't matter if they're married, single, whatever. He's screwed director's wives backstage when the director's in the audience."

"Satyriasis?"

"Maybe that's the clinical name for it. I think he's just addicted to sex. A couple of shows, the female cast have been tearing each other's hair out over him, and then they've tried to kill him when he's moved on to another woman."

"Jesus. Has he ever had a relationship that lasted?"

“Several. Once with a psychiatrist that lasted for about five years. He went to her for therapy, they screwed in her office and then lived together. He was never faithful, and later she said to me that she didn’t know whether she’d been seduced or was just fascinated by him as a case.” He took a deep breath. “The bottom line is, that he can be trouble, but when he’s on song there aren’t many better.”

She took a drag on her Marlboro as a taxi pulled up outside. “You can let him know, quietly, that I don’t care who or what he screws, but the people in the show are off limits until closing night. If he disrupts the show in any way, I’ll cut his balls off and nail them to his forehead. After the show closes, he can line them up and take them one at a time or all at once, if they’ll have him, but not before.” She walked out the door to the waiting car and pitched her cigarette into the gutter.

OoO

Linda came hurrying in through the stage door with a bundle of costumes in plastic wraps over her shoulder. “Ed,” she called while she hung them carefully on a rack in the wardrobe room, “there was a man outside, looked like a reporter. He asked me what the show was going to be.”

Ed walked over and helped her hang the costumes. They had the beautiful smell of fresh clothes that have never been worn, shirts still stiff with starch and the brocade not yet dulled by use. “What did you say?”

“I played dumb and said I was just delivering from the dry cleaners. I don’t think he bought it, though.”

“Why?”

She turned to Ed. “The expression on his face, for one thing. He just didn’t look like he believed me.”

“What did he look like?”

“Medium height and weight, jacket and tie, short brown hair. Nothing stood out.”

“Let me know if you see him again.”

“I will.” She gave him a quick kiss on the nose. “I have to rush back. I don’t totally trust those girls with the fabric for the court gowns. If they stuff it up, I’ll have to recut it, and I don’t want to do that.”

“You’re having fun, aren’t you?”

She laughed. “What, given a free hand to play with the costumes instead of having to follow some designer’s myopic vision? Hell, no. I’d much rather stock designs from fifty years ago.” She paused.

“It’s different. I mean, it’s all illusion, but I’m used to creating the illusion with limitations. When I have the real freedom to use my imagination, I can create different illusions. I mean, the gowns, the doublets, everything, are utterly gorgeous. It’s not real jewellery, but I’m using the best of the phoney stuff. It’s how it affects the cast that’s important. It just *feels* right. The silk isn’t silk, but it feels like silk. The gems glitter enough to fool the punters. They don’t have to pretend about their costumes. Maybe that can help them pretend about the rest.” She smiled. “Gotta go.”

Ed watched her exit the stage door and smiled to himself. He’d been lucky, he thought, in finding Linda, something else to thank the theatre for. But this reporter worried him. Sure, the press would be interested, but they usually knocked at the front door, or called ahead. *I think I’ll do a bit of a call around the papers, to see if he was really a reporter, and let everyone know about this bloke, and to call me or the cops if he shows up again. Christ, I hope we haven’t upset the wrong people. I think I’ll have a chat to Barry about this.*

“She’s right, you know,” Mick O’Halloran called out from his workbench. Some of them,” he gestured at the stage above with his thumb, “want real swords and armour. Jesus, they do until they feel the weight of the stuff. Some of them want real food and real booze, as well.”

“That could be a disaster.”

“Sure, if they have to drink a bottle of scotch through the show. A little wine or beer doesn’t hurt. Tastes better than diluted flat Coke.”

Ed looked up from the props list he was working on and stretched. “I worked one show, this Australian political comedy, where they used real beer. There was a line in the show, ‘We’ve only got Resch’s.’ That was easy enough to handle, just pick up a carton from the nearest pub before the show. Then there was a beer delivery strike. Well, I had to run all over the place to get beer, and that line changed every night, until it wound up being ‘we’ve got everything but Resch’s,’ then ‘We haven’t got any Australian beer.’ Problem was, the bastards would get into it after the show every night, so I couldn’t keep a stock.”

Mick laughed. “Ah, they like their drink, they do. But most of them are cheery drunks. You don’t get many mean ones.”

“They get a little maudlin sometimes, but, no, you don’t get many mean ones.”

Mick cocked his head. “What’s that upstairs?”

Ed listened. He could hear Barry’s voice raised in what sounded like alarm, and a couple of others mingling incoherently. “I’ll go see.”

Up on the stage, Madelyn was huddled with a short, dark man in a leather jacket. He was pointing to the wings and waving an arm, indicating something. There was no sign of Barry, but his slightly anguished tones echoed from the front of house. He was pleading with god for someone to slow down.

Ed moved to cross towards Madelyn when he heard rapid, soft footfalls behind him. He turned, and a large dog leapt up and put its paws on his chest. It followed this by attempting to lick his face off.

Barry emerged from the house. "Oh, Jesus; he's been uncontrollable since he got here. Sorry, Ed."

Madelyn and her friend had turned towards Ed. "Bruno," Madelyn yelled, "get the fuck off him." The dog guiltily dropped down and sat with his tongue hanging out. He looked, to Ed's relatively inexperienced eye, like a floccati rug with feet.

The little man with Madelyn walked across. "He's just a big softy," he said. "He's been stuck in a 'plane for bloody hours and he wants to run around a bit." He scratched the dog's ears, which set the beast's tail wagging. "Don't you, Bruno?"

The man looked as if he could have entered the stage via any episode of *The Sopranos*. Swarthy, Roman nose, black hair slicked back, he got up and offered Ed his hand with a jaunty assurance. "Marco Meddolini," he said. His accent was pure Bow Bells.

"Pleased to meet you, too," Ed replied, shaking his hand. "I thought you lived in Jersey. You haven't picked up any accent."

Madelyn looked over at him from where she stood. "The island of Jersey, not New Jersey."

Ed didn't say that he thought Marco would have fitted right into the streets of Hoboken, particularly the south side. "So, what do you think of the stage?"

"I've only been 'ere five bleeding minutes. Haven't 'ad much of a look yet. It's a nice big bugger. The set should fit nicely."

"He's done some preliminary drawings," Madelyn said. "I haven't seen them yet."

"Yeah, well, darling, they're in that portfolio that Barry was carrying. We can 'ave a look now, if you like."

Barry brought them over and they laid them out on the stage floor. "I've never got used to doing stuff on a computer," Marco said. "Yer can't see it properly on a screen."

There were eight of them, and the first thing Ed noticed was how clean they were. Little decoration, the sets were almost bleak. “Of course, this is only from what Maddie told me she wanted. I can get it better after I’ve seen the script and gone down the pub with it for a while.”

Barry’s head jerked up from his inspection of the set. “Oh, you can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“The scripts stay here in the theatre. The actors learn their lines and do line runs up in the green room. We lock the scripts in a safe every night.”

“Bugger that. I work in a pub.”

“Sorry.” Barry shook his head. “Much too dangerous. Mr Mayne gave specific instructions. The publicity starts in a couple of days and it will be even more dangerous then. People would kill to get their hands on this script.”

“Yeah, well, that brings up a little bleeding point, dunnit? What is this bloody play?”

Madelyn said “It’s *Henry VII*, by William Shakespeare.”

“What? For real?”

Madelyn nodded.

“Bloody ‘ell.”

“Barry can fill you in on the back story, but it’s the genuine article. We’re going to make history, Marco.”

“Yeah, well, that makes it even more important that I get down the pub with it.”

“We can bring drinks up to the green room, if you want.” Barry said. “Anything. Beer? Scotch?”

“Nah, that’s not it. It’s like the ambience. Y’know? I can think in a pub, just in a quiet corner. Frees up me brain.”

“Could you try it up in the green room? Or we can set up an office for you.”

“Wouldn’t work. I’ve done it this way since I left the London School of Art. Every time I’ve tried anything else, it’s been a cock-up.”

“For fuck’s sake Barry,” Madelyn snapped, “that’s the way Marco works. Find him a script, find him a pub and leave him alone; he’s got work to do and we’re already behind because of the fumble-fingered moron you hired first. Send him in with a pack of bodyguards, if you have to.”

Barry gaped and tried to find words.

“Can I say something?” Ed asked.

Madelyn looked at him.

“Marco, does it have to be a big pub?”

Marco shook his head. “Nah, just somewhere quiet would do.”

“We can open up the bar downstairs. It’s used for drinks at interval. They set it up like an old pub, and it’s got beer on tap, proper wooden bar and everything. We were going to open it a couple of days before first night, for the dress previews. Would that do?”

“Sounds bloody ideal, mate.”

“How long would it take?” Barry asked.

“There’s no booze there right now, but that wouldn’t take long to get. I could get a keg delivered in a couple of hours, and there’s a bottle shop down the block.”

“Whassat, then?”

“An off-licence,” Ed explained.

“Well, Barry?” Madelyn asked.

“Oh, Ed,” Barry gushed, “you’re an absolute lifesaver. As long as the script doesn’t leave the building, it will be okay.”

“I’ll turn the power on now and go get some booze. What do you drink, Marco?”

“Guinness, mate, or Badger, if you can get it.”

“Maybe in bottles. You’ll have to put up with a local brew from the taps.”

“Ah, well; I’ve heard you make some acceptable beer out in the colonies. Just don’t make it too bloody cold.”

Ed laughed and went to turn on the power.

Ed left Terry downstairs to organise the lights and turn on the fridge. A man was idling by the doors to the foyer, someone who fitted Linda's description. He came over as Ed closed the door behind him.

"G'day," he said. "Do you work here?" His accent was one of those mid-Indian Ocean ones that belong to poms who have spent time in Australia, or Australians who have spent a lot of time in England.

"Just a messenger boy. I'm off to get some stuff right now, so if you'll excuse me . . ."

"What's the show they're doing?"

"Don't really know. Some costume thing. I don't pay much attention."

"There's a few dollars in it if you can find out for me." He handed Ed a card. It read 'Bernie Holmes, Journalist' and it was marked with the logo of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "There's more if you can get me a copy of the script. Just call the mobile number. That'd be best; I'm mostly out on the job, not in the office much."

Ed turned the card over. "Why the script?" *This is bullshit*, he thought. *The Herald wouldn't skulk around in back alleys, asking for a script.*

"Easier to write about a play that you've read. We've tried to get information about this one, but they're being very close-mouthed. Why? What's the big secret?"

Ed shrugged his shoulders. "Beats me. I just run errands and help out the mechs. Got to go."

He put the card in his pocket as he walked off down the street. Holmes wasn't a journo, he was sure of that. He didn't talk like one and he didn't look like one. There was a little bit too much muscle under that brown tweed jacket, and he stood a little bit too ready to move. His nose had been broken and reset skilfully, but there was still a slight kink to it. Ah, well; maybe it was an old football injury. He looked a bit like a lock. Had the squashed ears. But, still, it was bloody suspicious, and he might get Mick to keep an eye out, and send a little note to Mayne via Barry as soon as he got back to the theatre. He'd like even better to put some security on, but that would stretch the budget a little too far.

Surprisingly, the bottle shop had Badger's in small bottles. The man at the counter explained that they kept them for the local soccer club, who were mostly Poms. Ed picked up half a dozen for now and a bottle each of scotch, gin and vodka, plus some mixers. He arranged for a couple of kegs and more wine and spirits to be delivered later that afternoon and walked back. Holmes was gone. Ed mentioned the conversation with him to Barry.

“That sounds terribly suspect, Ed. The *Herald* and the other papers have been briefed that there’ll be a press conference in three days. They’re all waiting with their journalistic tongues hanging out to see what prompted Mr Mayne to buy a theatre and put on a production. We’ll probably have to check the spelling of everything before it’s printed, they’ll be so full of canapés and sparkling wine.”

“So why? He didn’t look much like a critic to me.”

Barry spread his hands. “I really don’t know. Perhaps he wants an exclusive, get a jump on the other media. Maybe he’s been transferred from the sports pages.”

Ed laughed at the idea and left Barry with Marco and Terry in the bar. Madelyn had the cast on stage, they’d just run through the first few scenes and she was giving them notes.

“Hank, that was better, but you have to make the fear less obvious. He’s complex, fchrissakes, not just a villain like Iago, but he’s not a loser. This is the guy who beat Richard and faced off a couple of rebellions. His oldest son’s dying, and his youngest son’s a wastrel. He’s got a guilty conscience, but it hasn’t weakened him. Cut down on the gestures and stand up straighter. Play it with your face, your body will follow.”

She turned from Henry and looked down at her notes, then looked up at Greg Mansfield.

“Greg, what the fuck was that stroll downstage? That wasn’t how we moved it.”

“It felt right.”

“I’ll tell you what the fuck feels right. Stay upstage OP and keep still, then cross to up centre when Claire comes in. Do the lines from there.”

“Yes, Madelyn.” He retired to a seat on stage.

Madelyn turned to her next victim. “Claire, can you forget that you went to Cambridge and lose the pretend French accent? This isn’t Moliere and they spoke Norman French, not whatever broke-back version of conversational French your tutors drilled into you so you could really enjoy your summer holidays. We’ll save the accents for the ambassadors and Catherine.” She flicked through her notes and looked up at Nicole. “Can you for Christ’s sake forget about seduction? Catherine is supposed to be seduced by Roland, not the other way around. And Ed,” she turned to him, “are those costumes ready yet?”

“Linda brought them in from the workshop this morning. They’re in wardrobe.”

“Claire, get your arse down there and try yours on. Get used to moving in it. Nicci, go with her and tell Linda that I don’t want your boobs to stick out so much. You’re supposed to be seventeen. Go.”

“All the costumes are labelled,” Ed called out to the scurrying actresses.

“And that brings me to you, Mr Redmond.” She looked down at the pad on her lap and flipped pages for a few seconds. A silence spread out from her. The other actors stopped chatting and stared uneasily at her. She looked up. “Hank, Mr Redmond, you stay. The rest of you can go up to the green room.” She looked across at Ed. “Or down to the bar, if it’s ready.” Ed nodded. “Okay, that’s it.”

The cast, apart from Henry and Kevin, moved offstage. Madelyn waited until the noise of their departure had finished, then said “Ed, can you go up on stage? Just stand up OP.”

Ed went up the steps and when he was in position Madelyn called out “Walk to down towards Prompt Corner and sit on the chair, facing away to down right.” Puzzled, Ed did so.

“Okay, thanks. Redmond, what did you see?”

“Uh, he walked across the stage and sat down.”

“Anything else?”

“He looked over at the wings.”

“Hank, what did you see?”

“Maddy, this isn’t fair,” Henry said.

“Tell me us what you fucking saw so that Redmond can start to learn a little bit about acting.”

Henry sighed. “By his expression, Ed was obviously puzzled. His eyebrows went up and his lips pursed a little. He looked down at you before he walked across and paused to look at the chair before he started, then moved reasonably quickly, not sauntering, but not rushing. He hitched his thumbs into his pockets before he started . . .”

“What does that tell you?”

“I think it’s probably habitual, that he does it whenever he’s unsure of a situation.”

“Why?”

“Usually it’s because the hands are resting comfortably, not particularly aggressive, not moving out where they might hit something, but available quickly if there’s reason. That wouldn’t be true if he put his hands in his pockets.”

“Okay, go on.”

“His shoulders were pushed a little forward and he was leading with his upper body, but his posture was balanced. When he sat, he put one hand on the chair to steady it as he sat down. He sat gently, as if testing that the chair would hold his weight, then clasped his hands, rested them on his thighs and looked across stage.”

“Why the clasped hands?”

“His task was over.”

“What did all this tell you about him?”

Henry sighed again. “That he’s a person confident of his abilities, even when performing an unfamiliar task, or a task for which he doesn’t know the reason. Probably someone who has been around the block a few times.”

“Okay, thanks.” She turned her head towards Redmond. “You had to do the same thing, simply enter upstage right and walk to downstage left, then sit down. You made a false start, and then went back to your entry position, instead of just carrying on and adjusting. You fucking *sidled* across the stage like a crab, keeping most of your face to the audience at all times. You had your upstage arm cocked up against your ribs with the hand hanging down limply, while the other arm swung backwards and forwards with a pseudo-military precision that looked entirely fake. When you sat, you sprawled, scratched your ear with the downstage hand, then you beamed out into the audience as if you’d performed a really good trick. You suddenly remembered that you had to look across the stage, and managed to do it while making sure that your profile was displayed in its best aspect. Ed here,” she pointed at him, “is no actor.” Ed waved and nodded. “But at the moment, by just doing what he was told to do, without trying to *act* it, he’s a better Roland De Velville than you are.”

She stood up and gathered up her things, then lit a cigarette. “Mr Redmond, this is not the cinema. We don’t do multiple takes. If you fuck it up, you fuck it up in front of the audience for once and for all. We don’t adjust camera angles to make sure you look good, nor do we pull in for a close-up when you have to express some emotion. If I asked Henry, or any of the others, to imitate what Ed just did, he’d make a pretty good fist of it because, without prompting, he observed and remembered the physical characteristics, interpreted them, and would probably have come up with his own version. In four weeks, six days and five hours, you have to *be* Roland De Velville, bastard son of King Henry VII, pissed off because he won’t inherit and scheming to change that.” She took a drag on her cigarette. “We’ve had a week of solid line runs and just plain time to learn lines. Every single cast member knows their part. Except you. You called Lady Margaret ‘my lord,’ and anyone who could mistake Claire for a man in that micro-top she was wearing today needs lessons and glasses. Christ, when she curtsied I could see her nipples from the twelfth row back. You spoke lines out of order.

You missed lines. People had to cover for you. I know this script pretty well, by now, and I had no idea that there was a line ‘that is the king, your father, over there, my lord,’ in it. That was because you addressed the line ‘sire, what of your son?’ to the Papal ambassador, a cardinal. You turned the line ‘fishing, to lure the spotted carp’ into ‘wishing to be sure the potted fish was caught.’”

She moved to the aisle and started to walk out, but stopped and turned her head. “Four weeks, six days, four hours and fifty-five minutes, and counting. Get your shit together. Ten o’clock call tomorrow.”

She left, her cigarette a moving red dot in the dark house.

“Holy Christ,” Ed breathed. He was impressed. He’d heard some directors give actors a going-over, but nothing like that. He turned to see the reaction.

Redmond sat, head down, his hands clasped tight together. Henry walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “It may not comfort you at this moment, dear boy, but when I first met her, Madelyn gave me a going-over that was much worse than that.”

“But what does she fucking *want*?” Redmond burst out, almost in tears. “I try, and I had my lines down cold. I eat sleep and breathe this play, but whenever she’s watching, I lose it.”

“Madelyn is quite right about one thing, though. If she makes you nervous, what will an audience filled with every bitchy critic in the world do to you? On top of that, every numbnuts academic who thinks they know something about Shakespeare will come to this show, and pick it to pieces in the academic press. Make no mistake, this is a big show, and Madelyn is staking her reputation on it.”

“So what can I do?”

“Madelyn would say that you should learn to act, but she’s a vicious bitch. Look,” he paused, “what I did in observing Ed is automatic, from forty years of experience. Maddy was being incredibly unfair. You’re what, twenty five?” Redmond nodded. “You can’t hope to do what I do. What you *can* do is put on a performance that will convince the audience you are who you claim you are. Much as Madelyn hopes for it, there is rarely such a thing as a perfect show.”

“Directors who give notes all through a run,” Ed said. “They get in the way more than anything. They try to correct every single error, every tiny thing, and all they do is monster the actors, who respond by fluffing their lines even more. You know Lionel Bent, Henry?”

“Oh, I do. Worked two shows with him, and they were both lovely experiences.”

“Yeah, well, I worked one in Melbourne with him a few years ago. He was a monster, yelled and screamed worse than Madelyn. Opening night, he walked backstage and people were pissing themselves. He shook hands and walked out. Said it was their show now, and that he was proud of them. Never came back. The show ran for close to six months.”

“Madelyn,” said Henry, “will almost certainly do something similar. But she will call down the fires of hell to get the show where she wants it before that.”

“But what do I do?”

Henry looked up at Ed. “I would suggest that first you learn to relax a little. Is the bar still open?”

“I haven’t closed it.”

“Then I further suggest we have our first lesson in relaxation technique accompanied by a gin and tonic or two.”

CHAPTER SIX

The press conference was held on Wednesday, and the shit hit the fan on Thursday. It wasn't usual for Ed to watch morning television, but Linda rushed into the suite's bedroom while he was dressing and said "Come quick and take a look at this!"

Still buttoning his shirt, he came into the lounge as Linda turned up the volume on the television. It was an early morning talk show, and the person being interviewed looked a little bewildered. He was young, and blinked behind thick glasses.

"So you contend it has to be a fake?" the interviewer, a glossy blonde, asked.

"It purports to be a series of manuscripts letters and diaries in the hand of William Shakespeare, along with a copy of a play called *Henry VII*, in the same hand. It's nonsense. Modern theory ascribes the authorship of 'Shakespeare's' plays to Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford." The young man's accent was distinctly Heart of England.

"Who was dead before the last plays were written," another voice broke in. The camera cut to the speaker, an older man with a full head of white hair and a beard. He looked much more at ease in front of the camera than the other as he leaned forward and jabbed a finger in the younger man's direction. "You talk of modern theory as if it was holy writ, and the Oxfordian theory has always been opposed since it came up in the 20s. Now there's direct evidence that supports the mainstream theory of authorship, and you don't like it, so you call it a fake. Oxford died too early, and there is absolutely no direct evidence, nor has there ever been, that he wrote the plays."

"There is a host of indirect evidence that supports the theory, Dr Bryant."

"And there is a host of direct evidence that the theory is flawed, built up on surmises with no actual basis. It was Looney that proposed it, and he was well named."

"An *ad hominem* argument carries little weight."

"Really? Well, does the argument that this is all something that Oxford University supports just to stir the pot and make a few bucks out of publications and learned discourse sound any better?"

"Are you criticising Oxford University, doctor?"

"I'm allowed to, I got my doctorate there."

"As did I."

“Yes, Dr Clerk-Maxwell, but you’re still sucking at its academic teat, while I got over the indoctrination pretty quickly.”

“What!”

The moderator intervened. “Doctor Bryant, do you think the manuscript is genuine?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen it. But I’m not about to judge it until I do, certainly not on the basis of any prejudice I possess. The one thing I will say is that, if it is genuine, it will not only open up new perspectives on Shakespearean scholarship, but a whole new Shakespeare industry.”

“You say you can’t judge it until you see it. When do you think that will be?”

“Not until after opening night, that’s for sure. But I’ll be there, if I can get a ticket.”

“Dr Clerk-Maxwell, will you be there at opening night.”

The younger man, still red-faced, nodded quickly.

“Then it will be interesting to compare your responses.” She turned to look directly into the camera. “This is Eve Clark, and I’ve been talking to Dr James Clerk-Maxwell of Oxford University, and Dr Adam Bryant, Professor of Shakespeare Studies at Sydney University, about the sensational news from the Elizabethan Theatre. This is *Morning Talk*, and the time is twelve minutes past seven.”

Linda turned off the television and snickered. “That was interesting. The cut and thrust of academic debate, hey?”

“I thought they were going to start throwing punches. I liked that Bryant guy. I’ll have to see if I can get him a comp for the opening.”

“We’re getting comps?”

“Yeah, if they don’t want a strike on their hands. It’s a bloody big theatre, so they can afford to let a few seats go.”

When they got to the theatre an hour later, there was a cluster of people at the foyer door, and a smaller cluster behind at the stage door. A lot of them had cameras with them, probably television journalists. Some looked as if they were waiting for the box office to open. They’d be disappointed; bookings wouldn’t open until a week before the show. The first night was invitation only.

They avoided the questions of the reporters at the stage door and slipped inside as quickly as they could. Marco was inside, looking at some sketches on the floor. Ed walked around to look at them. They were utterly gorgeous, sumptuous.

“They look good, Marco.”

“Ta, mate. These are the last ones. Lighting might be a bit fiddly on a couple.”

“Terry’ll have a look, but we’ll know better when it’s up.”

Marco turned to him. He had bags under his eyes and a smudge of ink on his cheek. “When’ll that be, then?”

“I can get the plans and sketches to the mechs today; we can start painting and dressing as soon as the flats are finished.”

“Yeah, well, don’t bother; I’ll paint them meself.”

“You know what you want. It’d be good. Madelyn would be pleased.”

Marco laughed. “Jesus, that’d be a bleeding first.” He rubbed his face and yawned.

Ed said “Did you work all night?”

“Yeah. Well, the bleeding show goes up soon, and that fuckin’ idiot you had to start with didn’t have a fuckin’ clue.”

“Go home; get some sleep.”

“Nah. Is the bar open?”

“I can open it.”

“Yeah. I’ll have a couple of beers and then get a nap somewhere. C’n you send someone to the hotel to get me some clothes? There’ll be a brown bag there. Just get them to bring that. And Bruno’s asleep somewhere backstage; c’n you find someone to walk him and give him a tin of dogfood?”

Ed watched Marco amble off towards the bar and pressed the intercom button to the bio box.

“Terry,” he said, “can you get the bar open? And when you’ve done that, I’ve got some drawings for you to look at.”

The box squawked back “No worries. I’ll be there in five. Who’s the customer?”

“Marco.”

“Bloody workaholic. I’ll pour him a beer first.”

Ed looked at the drawings again. Now he understood why Madelyn had insisted on Marco. Not only were they utterly craftsmanlike, they were works of art. As he flipped through them, Ed could *feel* the

world they created, a palace of regret, intrigue, deceit and tragedy, concealed beneath a gilded mask. MM was scrawled in the bottom right hand corner of each, like an artist's signature. And Marco was right, a few of them would be difficult to light, to do justice to them.

Terry came in and Ed showed the plans and drawing to him. "We won't be making this one into a merry and glittering hall," Terry said. "Want me to take them down to the mechs? I have to nip over to Strand to see about some more gels, I can do it on the way."

"That would be good. Leave the plan."

After Terry left, Ed went up and began to mark the set plan on the stage with masking tape. He used different colours to indicate any changes for different scenes, and he was still working when Madelyn and the cast arrived.

"Marco's finished?" she said, looking at the tape on the floor.

"Yeah, and it looks bloody good. The sketches are downstairs, and the flat designs are with the mechs. I'll have this last bit done in a few minutes."

"Good. There's another thing."

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to need someone to sit with me and take notes while I'm running the show."

Ed paused. "I would have had ASMs in before this, but Barry said Mayne wants the crew kept to a minimum until a couple of weeks before the show. Saves money."

"Screw Mayne. I need to concentrate and dictate notes."

Ed considered. "Linda might be able to do it most times, and I could do it when she's needed in wardrobe. Most of the costumes have been done, now, and she just has to clean and maintain them."

"Good. Get her here and we can start. People!" She raised her voice. "Listen up. All the costumes are here, so go and get into them. Every run will be in dress from now on."

"That won't work." Ed shook his head as he said this.

"Why?"

"Linda will need to help with costume changes. She can't be in two places at once."

“It’s not a problem. The costume changes are at the end of scenes and acts, and we’ll take a break whenever there has to be a change. I’m gonna take it slow. We won’t do full runs for another couple of weeks.”

“Okay, I’ll go down and tell Linda.”

As the actors scurried away to their dressing rooms, Ed put the last piece of tape in place and followed them downstairs.

OoO

She ran act two three times, until she was satisfied that it was headed in the right direction. There weren’t many costume changes, because most of the action was in the palace, so Linda could manage all the notes for Madelyn. She came up to the bio box after the rehearsal was over and Barry had locked away the scripts for the night.

“That was fun,” Linda said.

Ed looked over to her. “There’s a hint of irony in that, isn’t there?”

She came and sat by the table where Terry and Ed were working. “A hint, maybe, but not much. It was a bit like sitting next to a wolverine in heat, but, by Christ, does that woman know her stagecraft. You know? She’s not like those directors who just give notes because they want to feel important.”

“There’s more than a few of those,” Terry said.

“Yeah, but I could see the reason for every note she gave. Sometimes she’d give me a note, and then a little while later get me to cross it out, because the character had corrected whatever they were doing without her help. And you know another funny thing? The person she did that for most was Redmond.”

Ed raised his brows.

“Yeah. She’d say something and sometimes there’d be this tone, like vicious satisfaction, in her voice. Then a few minutes later she’d change the note. At one stage she muttered ‘the bastard’s learning,’ as if she was amazed.”

“She still spent twenty minutes reaming him out after they broke,” Ed said.

“And he spent all that time nodding and writing down everything she said.”

“Yeah. I wonder what’s happening?”

“Henry talks to him a lot after rehearsals when they’re down in the bar,” Terry said. “I see them going through notes together when I’m down there.” Terry had become bartender pro-tem, since his main job couldn’t start until the set was up.

“Jesus, Henry must be giving lessons,” Ed muttered. “Leon’s going to be pissed if Redmond gets good enough to do the show. He was almost promised the part.”

“What’s this?” Linda asked.

“Madelyn’s trying to force Redmond to pull out. She doesn’t think he’ll be able to get it together in time.”

“She might be right. He’s still pretty dismal, and Leon’s a real pro, when he’s not chasing women.”

“Have you noticed him up to his old tricks?”

Linda shook her head. “Uh-uh. He’s been as good as gold, even around that tart Claire. You know she wanted me to lower the bustline on her court dress? About four inches.”

“That would leave absolutely nothing at all to the imagination. What did you do?”

“Mentioned it to Madelyn and she told Claire that this was Shakespeare, not the Folies Bergere, and she’d wear the costume she was given.”

“That would have made you popular with Claire.”

“Who cares? She’s a fine actress but she wants to be a Marilyn Monroe instead of acting the part she’s given. And you know the funny thing?”

“What?”

“When she studied at the Sorbonne she worked part-time at the Lido, as a dancer. I think I’ll make up a sequined G-string and a couple of tit tassels as a present for opening night.”

“For Christ’s sake don’t! She might decide to wear them. And Nicci would be jealous and demand some too.”

Linda laughed. “Now that might be the thing that would knock Leon off his good behaviour. You almost finished here?”

“Yes. We can shut up shop now.”

“I’ve booked seats for dinner at that Lebanese place Barry told us about. It’s not far. Do you want to come, Terry?”

“Be glad to.”

“Good. Barry said he’d meet us there about seven.”

OoO

At a quarter past seven, as they were finishing their hummus and babbaganouj, Barry stumbled in and plumped down at their table. His hair was a mess and there were stains on the pearl-gray topcoat he wore and matching stains on the knees of his trousers. “I’ve been mugged,” he said, and grabbed a glass of water.

“What?” Ed said. “Where did it happen? When did it happen?”

Barry took a deep drink. “Just around the corner, a few minutes ago. I was coming from the parking lot and someone grabbed me from behind, pushed me onto my face in the alley and stole my fucking briefcase. That was a bloody Valextra Antipode! From Milan! You can’t get them in Australia. And look at these clothes; they’re ruined. You can’t *get* stains out of cashmere.”

“Calm down,” Linda said. “Have you called the police?”

“I haven’t called the police because my bloody Bang and Olufsen Serene was in my briefcase, where I thought it would be safe from pickpockets.”

“Are you hurt?”

Barry took a deep breath. “Apart from bruised knees and a hairdo that’s utterly ruined, I think I’m undamaged. A drink would be good, though.”

Linda poured him some wine while Ed called the police. “Did you see anything? Anyone?”

Barry put the glass down after draining it. “No-one. By the time I got up the alley was empty. I heard a car taking off pretty quickly from the parking lot.” His voice was still a little shaky, but he’d calmed down a little. “I could do with another one of those.”

Linda poured him another glass.

“Okay,” Ed said, “the cops will be here soon. What was in the briefcase? Anything valuable?”

“What, apart from the Serene? The briefcase was worth twelve grand on its own.”

Ed whistled. “Some briefcase. Anything else that was worth having, apart from the ‘phone?”

“Nothing, really. My address book, a copy of today’s newspaper, my business diary. That’s it. But they didn’t go for my wallet, or my watch, and that’s a Patek Phillipe.”

“Maybe they didn’t have time to grab the rest.”

“I don’t know.”

“You stay here with Linda and we’ll go and have a look around.”

Newtown is not really one of the hellholes of the world, but it has its share of dark alleys. Some of them were boundary markers, where Greek was spoken on one side and Lebanese on another, with Italian just a little way down. The air was rich with the scent of herbs and spices from the dinners on the stove. Sydney had always had these little exotic corners, Ed thought, in among the steak-and-potatoes of the older guard. People left their home countries for this new one, and worked on the railway or down at the docks or on building sites, or opened shops and worked every hour that god gave them. They learned all about cricket and football and brought their kids up to be doctors and lawyers, but they brought their food with them, brought the tastes of home. And good on them, he thought. He could remember when the only place you got olive oil was at a chemist, and spaghetti was something that came from a tin. Now the suburban mums were working their way through tapas recipes and you could order a glass of wine in a bar without someone calling you a poofter. Well, he amended - most bars. It still might not be wise to try it in one of the front bars around the Eveleigh Street railway workshops.

Ed and Terry walked back down to the parking lot where Barry had parked. The alley was empty of both people and briefcases. When they got to the parking lot, Barry’s Mini-Cooper and a beaten-up kombi were the only cars there. They had a look around, but there was nothing. By the time they got back to the restaurant, the cops were there.

Barry had calmed down quite a bit, after another few glasses of wine. Ed sent Terry to get another couple of bottles and sat down. Barry told much the same story to the police that he had to Ed, and they were equally bemused by it.

“Sounds a bit organised for just a snatch and grab, like they thought you’d have something valuable in the briefcase. Maybe it was the briefcase itself. You said it was very valuable.” The senior constable who was asking the questions scribbled in his notebook as he said this.

“Yes, and it’s got a uniquely coded chip in it that identifies it as mine. They couldn’t possibly sell it.”

“The ‘phone?”

“They couldn’t even use it without the code.”

As he opened a bottle he’d brought, Terry said “Does it have GPS?”

“Of course.”

“Should be able to track it, then. Just make a call to it.”

“Now, there’s a bright idea,” the cop said. “What’s the number?” He went out to the car and made a call, returning a few minutes later. “You’re in luck. It’s somewhere in this immediate area. If we do a sweep, we’ll probably find it. True to his word, he and his offsider returned to the restaurant, after a quick cruise through the surrounding streets, carrying the briefcase.

“Oh, God; what have they done to you?” Barry cried.

The fine Italian leather was ripped and scratched. One end was ripped open and the locked pockets were slit. There were gashes in the bottom. It looked as if someone had searched it thoroughly and brutally.

“Well, I reckon that eliminates the briefcase as the object of the robbery,” the cop said. “Is there anything missing?”

Barry gently examined it as he cradled it in his lap, like a hurt child. “I don’t think so,” he said in a tearful voice. “But why would they destroy it if they were after the briefcase itself?”

“Bugged if I know.” He reached over and took it. “We’ll take this down to the station and see if we can find prints. If you could come down tomorrow and fill in some forms, we can probably let you have it back then.”

When they’d left, Ed said “They were looking for something in the briefcase, that’s obvious, but what?”

Barry shook his head slowly. “I have no idea, no idea at all. I mean, all the scripts are locked in the safe. They’d have to be idiots to think I’d carry one around with me. I take care of production details, nothing to do with direction or acting.”

Linda said “Come on, I’ll drive you home. Maybe you’ll have some ideas tomorrow.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

There were groups around the theatre on Friday morning, some waving placards, some taping the placard wavers. They were all out the front, where the posters were up and none bothered Ed as he slipped down to the stage door. “What’s all that about?” he asked Terry when he got up to the bio box.

“They’re protesting about Shakespeare.”

“What?”

“There are Oxfordians, and Marlovians, even a couple of Baconians and one misguided little woman waving a sign that says “Rally for Raleigh.”

“What on earth are they going on about?”

“It was that interview that started it. I saw it on-line on a couple of the university sites, and Sydney’s just up the road from here. Heated debate spilling over into actual protest. Or it’s just that they’re smart-arses and one of their lecturers is involved and they want to get up his nose.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I don’t, either. What I believe is that it’s close to the break, students are bored and they’ll do anything for a bit of fun, especially if it involves a little touch of intellectual snobbery.”

“Jesus. What next?”

The answer came from down on the stage.

“Yoo hoo; are you up there, Ed?” It was Barry’s voice, sounding much chirpier than last night. “Come down, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

The person with Barry was tall and solidly built, wearing jeans and a hoodie. Ed recognised him as Dr Bryant, the professor from the interview.

“Ed, I’d like you to meet Dr Adam Bryant, from Sydney University.”

Bryant shook Ed’s hand with a firm grip. His hand had a solid ridge of calluses above the palm.

“There’s a right bunch of loonies out there, isn’t there? Including some of my students, who are just in it to be cheeky. I shall have to have a word with them next week.”

Ed laughed. “They’re not fighting yet.”

“Pubs aren’t open.”

Ed laughed again.

“Dr Bryant is coming on board at Mr Mayne’s invitation, to help write the programme notes, among other things.”

“Call me Adam, please. Those other things will probably include fending off twerps like Clerk-Maxwell.”

Ed said “What was he on about?”

“Aah, he’s one of those snobbish English bastards that reckons the son of a glover couldn’t have written the plays, because they show too much knowledge, education, literacy, take your pick. So they suggest that it had to be someone who was a noble, university educated, or both. There was even a suggestion that it was a French woman, at one stage. Of course, Shakespeare, the writer, has been claimed by a few countries, Nazi Germany among them.”

“Could you find Adam a place to work for a while? I have to get him a copy of the play to read.”

“Down in the bar seems to be becoming the favoured place. Okay by you, Adam?”

“It’s a bit early for a beer, but a coffee would be good.”

“When are the cast called, Ed?” Barry asked.

“Ten o’clock call. Madelyn should be in about half an hour before.”

Ed showed Bryant the bar and went to get some coffee from the Bellagio. Agnello filled up a jug for him and gave him a bag with some small pastries in it “from Serafina,” he said. By the time Ed got back, Bryant had his nose in a script. He looked up when Ed asked him how he wanted his coffee. “Just black, mate; there’s sugar over here.” He said “Cheers” when Ed brought him a cup. “That’s from the Bellagio, isn’t it?”

Ed admitted that it was.

“Bloody good coffee. Agnello’s dad’s got a little place next to mine up over the Hawkesbury. Grows grapes and olives.”

“What’s on your place?”

“Veggies and goats. I grow the best vegetables you’ll ever taste, and make the best goat cheese in Australia.”

“Sounds good.”

“Yeah, I’ll bring some down for you on Monday. I spend every weekend there, getting away from the city stink.”

“You a country boy?”

“Me? God, no. I was born in England and raised over here, in Harbord. The closest I ever got to the bush was French’s Forest. No, it’s a bit of a tree change for me. I bought a little place up off Wiseman’s Ferry Road, in Spencer, when I turned fifty. I started to ratchet down what I was doing then, because I was bloody worn out. My daughter runs it and I use it when I can. This bloody city,” he gestured to include the whole of Sydney, “gets me down now.” He shook his head. “It’s not like it was when I was a kid. Jesus!” He laughed. “What a bloody old man statement that is. But it’s true. Something happened in the eighties, and the town just took off like a rocket. I was at Oxford then, getting my doctorate, and when I came back I could hardly recognise the place. The *speed* of everything. It was exhilarating for a while, but it wears you out eventually. I got caught up in it, scrabbled for promotions, published two books a year, went to conferences and gave papers that nobody could understand, but they pleased the intellectual wankers and post-modernists, and I was living on coffee and valium.” He looked down at the manuscript, riffled the pages. “I managed to get married, produce a son and a daughter and get appointed to my present position. Then my wife died.” He looked up, and his weathered face had a few extra wrinkles around the eyes. “It was sudden. A massive stroke. I was away in Turkey, of all places, for a conference on the place of liminality in early modern texts. My daughter had to call me. The call was delayed because I was in the middle of a seminar, and they wouldn’t disturb me.” He shrugged. “Made me re-think a lot of things.” He finished his coffee. “Is there any more of that?” he asked, holding out his cup.

Ed poured another cup for him, and had one himself.

“Sugar?”

Ed nodded and Bryant passed him the jar.

“You know, this thing’s going to cause a stir when it gets out.”

“Why is that? Is it that good?”

“Not really. Shakespeare did some mediocre work along with the genius stuff. I’d say this is towards the good end of the middle, around *King John* or *Richard II*.”

“Then why?”

“Because it blames Henry for the attempted murder of the Princes in the Tower.”

Ed thought for a moment. “That’s been said before, hasn’t it?”

“Not by Shakespeare. And he doesn’t say Henry murdered them, only that he attempted to have it done, and failed.”

“So Richard did it, after all.”

“No, the play claims they lived. Not as Perkin Warbeck or any of the other rebels, but they disappeared, spirited off as pawns in the great game, to be played at a later stage.”

“So?”

“Willy was a great thief, and he stole most of his plays from somewhere else. We can pretty much work out the sources of all the history plays, mostly Holinshed, but I’m bugged if I know where he stole this from. He used Moore for *Richard III*, but Moore says the Princes were murdered by Richard. I’m not surprised this was never performed. All involved would have been in the tower the next day.”

“Then why did he write it if it could never be performed?”

“Now, that’s a question. People sometimes forget that William Shakespeare was a working playwright for a company, and his income depended on bums on seats. He wrote thirty-seven plays in twenty-three years, plus a couple of collaborations, a hundred and fifty-four sonnets and four other major poems. He was a working writer, not someone who sat around waiting for the muse. That’s why his work varies enormously in quality. It’s surprising that he’d write something that couldn’t be performed in public.”

“Could it be performed in private?”

“A coterie performance? Yeah, but it would have to be some group that he trusted with his life.”

0o0

After the rehearsal, Leon buttonholed Ed as he was headed down to the bar. It had become a custom for the cast to have a few drinks, under Barry’s watchful eye, before they went back to the hotel.

“When’s Redmond getting the shove?” he asked.

Ed looked around. “Don’t say that too loud. Why would you think that, anyway?”

“Come on. Madelyn has got me word perfect on his part, and she doesn’t care how well I know the others. I’m supposed to be shadowing half a dozen people in the rehearsals, but she only makes sure I’m there when Redmond’s on.”

“She might just be worried about him.”

“And not about Henry? Or any of the others? Kevin’s as healthy as a horse, there’s no worry he’ll miss a show.”

“You never can tell. Anyway, he might wind up having film commitments or something, so that you’ll have to take over during the run.” Ed knew his explanation was clumsy, but Leon had caught him off guard.

“Yeah. His only film commitment is to the movie of this play. Mayne’s already got him on contract and he’s just waiting on the script.”

“What? Who told you that?”

“Kevin. He’s not shy, and he can’t keep secrets worth a damn.”

“Who else is in on the movie?”

“Don’t know. If anyone else is, they’re keeping it close to the chest until it goes into production. But they’ll pull in screen actors. Big names that will draw the crowds.”

“Keep this all to yourself, right.” Ed ran a hand through his hair. It was starting to be one thing after another. “Look, I think our troubles are just starting. You heard about Barry?”

“Yeah.”

“And there was that argument during the interview, and those idiots outside today. There was someone pretending to be a journo, too, asking questions. We’re short handed because of all this secrecy, and because we just plain can’t afford to bring in a full crew yet. In about two weeks I’m going to have to get the rest of the crew in and bring them up to speed, and they have to be able to run in a couple of weeks more. I’ll be flat out doing that, and I don’t want to have to worry about anything else.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why didn’t you bring in the crew earlier?”

Ed stared at him and didn’t answer.

“You know, if I didn’t know Mayne was a millionaire, I’d think this show was a little short of the readies.”

“Yeah,” Ed said, “it is, and it’s complicated. Just keep it under your hat, alright?”

Leon smiled. “Mate, you got me this job. I’ll be a good boy.” He headed off down to the bar, then looked back. “At least, until the first night party, whatever role I’m playing.”

Ed was sufficiently disturbed by the conversation with Leon to go and see Madelyn about it. She was still sitting with Linda, going through notes. She looked up when Ed came along the seats.

“Hi. I was just going to come see you about the tabs. Marco asked if they could be up soon. He’s off in the workshop painting the flats. He said the first of them will be up tomorrow.”

Ed sat down. “I can hang the tabs as soon as the backing flats are up. They’re all ready, folded up backstage.” What Ed didn’t say, because he didn’t want to cop a serve from Maddy, was that the tabs were borrowed from another theatre that was dark right now, and he’d have to get them to fit as best they could. They were good quality black velvet, though, and they’d been treated for fire resistance a few months ago.

“Good. I can work better when the stage is dressed, and we can start to run props, as well.”

“That means I’ll have to get someone to run props. I wasn’t expecting that for a while yet.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll clear it with Barry. One more person won’t make a huge difference now, if it’s someone we can trust.”

“I can give a mate at NIDA a call, see if he’s got anyone interested in working as an intern for the show. That would be cheaper.”

“Fucking NIDA. Yeah, do it if it’s cheap, but make sure you get one who’s not full of themselves.”

“There’s something else.” He told her about the conversation with Leon. “What’s going to happen?”

“Ah, shit; Redmond’s improved. He still doesn’t know how to act, but he remembers his cues and he’s got his lines down pat. He hasn’t folded yet.” She rubbed a hand across her mouth. “I’ll see Leon tomorrow. I’d still prefer him in the part, but Redmond has to back out before he gets it.”

“Maybe I should tell Leon. I’ve known him for a while.”

“Yeah, okay.” She drummed her fingers on the clip board for a moment. “Tell you what, I’ll run understudies in the rehearsal tomorrow. Redmond might notice the difference between him and Leon. If he doesn’t, I’ll make him.”

Barry appeared on the stage and called down to them. “There you are, dears. Have you finished with that prompt script yet? I have to lock them up.”

“This is starting to give me the shits, Barry. I want to take it back to the hotel and work on it there. I’m the director. Is that a problem?”

A voice came from behind Barry. "Well, yes, Dr Vale, it is."

A man walked out onto the stage. He was tall, dressed in a grey suit. Mid brown hair cut fashionably short and a nondescript face. Nothing in particular stood out about him, except he carried himself with more confidence than most.

"And who the fuck are you?"

The man walked down from the stage and up to the row in front of the one they were in, then made his way along it. He offered Madelyn his hand. "Hello, Dr Vale. I'm Geoffrey Mayne."

She shook his hand. "Okay, that explains who you are. Now explain why I can't take the script home. It's getting close to performance, and I need to work on it."

Mayne shook hands with Ed and Linda before he replied. Barry was still up on the stage. He had his hand up to his mouth, as if he was trying to stop from saying something, or indicating that Madelyn should shut up.

"Well, Dr Vale, for one thing, it might be dangerous." He beckoned Barry down. "I think the reason Barry was attacked last night was that the attacker thought he might have had a script in his briefcase."

"So? It's not the original, it's a typed up copy, photocopied a dozen times or more. Who cares?"

Mayne sat down. "I do."

"Why?"

"Dr Vale, the script isn't copyright."

Oh, shit, Ed thought suddenly; of course it wasn't. Shakespeare had been dead for hundreds of years, and he was the author. Even if he had copyrighted it, the rights would have lapsed centuries ago. Mayne couldn't copyright it, even though he'd discovered it.

"That means anyone who gets a script in their hands can put on the play, and I'm damned sure I'm going to be the first. They could also publish it, and I'm going to be the first to do that, as well."

"It will be worth millions," Barry put in as he arrived.

"So why the fuck are we putting this show on with no money?" Madelyn asked with a degree of acid in her voice.

“It is only worth millions *once*, Dr Vale,” Mayne said. “If I go waving the script about, touting for investors, sure as eggs one of them will quietly print off a million copies, take the money and run.”

“And then there’s the film,” Ed said.

Mayne glanced over to him. He smiled and shook his head. “Bloody Kevin. Who’d he tell?”

“Leon, at least. I don’t know who else.”

“That boy will be the death of me. Yes,” he spoke up a little, “there will be a film, and negotiation is already taking place, but it’s dependent on the production; there’ll be Hollywood producers here on first night. We’re looking at people for the cast right now, and also looking for a director. Interested, Dr Vale?”

“Christ, no. I know how to direct the stage, not a film. I’ll stick with this.”

“I’m going to get Marco to do the design.”

“Still no.”

Maybe shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He looked around at the theatre. “So this is what it’s like. I’ve never been in here before. Never been inside any theatre when there wasn’t a show on.”

“Welcome to the Liz, then,” Ed said. “We’ve been expecting you for a while.” Christ, he thought, a *real* virgin. At some stage, I’ll have to sit down and have a little heart-to-heart with him about the theatre business.

Mayne smiled boyishly. “I had a lot of things to do, some of them in other countries. Now that I’m here, I like it. The place has atmosphere.”

Ed knew what he meant. Far too many modern theatres were sterile glass and concrete lumps that won architectural awards, despite their ugliness. Ed had long suspected that architects gave awards to other architects based on a set of principles that was both esoteric and arcane. The other thing was that architects weren’t actors, and some of the spaces they designed were utterly unsuitable for performance. The acoustics were awful, there was no wing space; Ed remembered being backstage for one ballet performance at the Opera House where a stage hand had to literally throw the ballerinas on stage because there was no room to take a run up. There were theatres where things dropped from the roof, one that was infested with possums, and ones where the air-conditioning couldn’t be used because it drowned out the actors, some where the dressing rooms were outside the theatre. The Liz wasn’t any of these things. She’d been built in the grand tradition of British theatres, before radio microphones and computerised effects, and she was solid. You could sit inside the auditorium, as

they were now, and be in a vault of darkness, removed from any world but the one before you on the stage, and that was what the punters paid their money for.

Madelyn echoed Ed's thoughts when she said "Atmosphere's good, but you have to get bums on seats for a show to pay its way. We'll get the party people, but we'll have to get a damn sight more."

Ed nodded in acknowledgement as Mayne looked puzzled.

"There are always the theatre tarts," Madelyn said, "who'll attend every first night and flash their intimate knowledge of the theatre, so they think, by dropping names and using terms they don't understand." She looked as if she wanted to spit. "They're the ones who applaud as soon as the curtain goes up; to show they appreciate the set, even if it's a bare stage."

Ed took over. "They shoot to their feet at the end and applaud wildly, even if the flats have collapsed, the actors are drunk and one act's accidentally been left out."

"They gather at the bar," Barry continued, "and tell everybody, actors, director, techs and the pizza-delivery boy who's wandered in to hand over a quattro stagione to the cleaning staff just how wonderful the show has been, how great they'd looked. They air-kiss total strangers from across the room, get pissed on inferior champagne and drive home to Double Bay or Toorak or their hobby farm in the hills where they raised stud alpacas as a tax loss."

"Then there are the critics," Madelyn sneered, "some of whom actually know something about the theatre, and they sit around and smile insincerely while they contemplate how they're going to rip the guts out of the show in their column in the morning. They're the ones wearing shoddy suits with an ink stain on the pocket of their shirt, a tie with egg on it, and brown suede boots."

"Or last season's Myer special," Barry said as Mayne looked increasingly dazed, "with fake Jimmy Choo shoes and a Louis Vuitton handbag they bought at a little shop in Denpasar, stuffed with pens, pencils, notebooks, cigarettes, mobile phones, purses, breath mints, bright red lipstick, perfume with an exotic French name with overdone musk, and a small bottle of vitriol."

"The tough audiences aren't the first nighters," Ed went on. "Those are full of flacks who've been invited. The tough ones are those who come afterwards, who sit in the cheap seats and watch everything, see everything, not just what their neighbour's wearing or who else is there. They're the ones who ask questions after the show, sometimes questions which are difficult to answer. If you sell them, it's a lay-down misere for the rest of the run."

"Of course, there are the first-timers, too," Barry said. "Don't know what to expect, don't know how to react, god love them, and often go out gobsmacked."

Mayne gazed at all of them in turn, and finally asked Ed a question. “Do you know where Dr Bryant is, Ed?”

“Probably still in the bar. He was hard at work there a while ago.”

“Good; I need to talk to him. And,” he shook his head as if it had suddenly filled up and he wanted to settle everything into place, “I think I need a drink.”

“We could all pop into the bar,” Barry said. “You could meet the cast, those of them who are still there.”

“That’d be all of them,” Madelyn said. She got up and made her way to the end of the row. “Come on, Mayne. You’re the angel; you can buy the first round.”

OoO

Nicci was the last to leave the bar as Ed was switching off the lights. She was dressed in something tight and dark red that emphasised her figure and had a scarf wound around her neck made of some complex fabric that incorporated glittering metallic bits into its weave. She wore stilletoes that were all of six inches high. All in all, she looked gorgeous.

“Night, Nicci,” Ed called.

She turned around at the stairs and waved at him. “Oh, goodnight Ed. I’m off to a party.”

“Lucky party.”

She came back down the stairs a few steps. “It’s my divorce party. My decree absolute came through today and Maddy gave me a leave pass to attend a little gathering of the girls at the Absinthe Salon. We’re all going to bitch about our ex-husbands and get plastered on Green Fairy Sazeracs.” She tossed the scarf over her shoulder and twirled on the step. “How do I look?”

Ed considered. “Predatory,” he said.

She threw her head back and guffawed. “Good,” she said. “It’s my theory that when attending a divorce party one should look like no sane man would ever divorce you.”

“How many is this?”

“For me? Or for the little group of vultures I call my friends? The third for me, and I’ve lost count of the rat-pack’s triumphs.”

“I don’t know if I should congratulate you or not.”

She walked back down into the bar and stood in front of the stairwell. The backlight from the stairs silhouetted her and cast red flames through her teased hair. "I'm a lucky girl," she said. "I've married three times for love, and not once for money. Sometimes I wish it had been the reverse, but it's always fun while it lasts." She pointed at Ed. "So when are you and Linda going to tie the knot?"

Ed shoved a couple of chairs under a table. "I'm not sure you're a shining example of a marriage broker, Nicci," he said gently.

"Ah, I could double for Ethel Merman. Answer the question."

"Well, we haven't discussed it."

"Jesus, Ed, you've got the catch of the century in that girl; smart, gorgeous and anyone who's not a redhead would kill for that hair. Get your act together, *adelfos*, or some sleazy little actrene is going to sweep her from your bed. Hell, I'd be tempted myself if I didn't like boys so much. And speaking of sleazy little actrenes," she said while she checked her watch, "how's Leon going?"

"He seems to doing pretty well, so far."

"I've never know him to keep his dick in his pants for so long."

"God, you're not going to tempt him to dally are you? That could go critical."

She laughed and hitched her bag onto her shoulder. "Been there, done that. It was fun, but that boy's not a keeper." She checked her watch again. "Got to go. Say hello to Linda for me." She walked up the stairs as gracefully as a panther on the prowl.

"Bugger me." Ed shook his head. "*Actors!*"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ed took a sip of his San Miguel. The sun was nearly down, and shadows were reaching out from the hills to cross the Hawkesbury River. There wasn't much traffic. Most of the people going north would take the highway, further east, or go up through St Albans to the west if they wanted to get to the national parks and on up to the New England Highway. Spencer was only a small town, about three hundred people, and it backed onto the Dharug National Park. Adam had said that the fishing was good, and that they'd go out on Saturday, see if they could get some bream or flathead, maybe a jewfish. A weekend of fishing and relaxation was just what they needed. He was glad that Adam had invited him and Linda up to Spencer for the weekend.

It had been, he thought, a bloody hectic week all around. Marco had laboured like a hero to get all the flats painted, and Madelyn had bitched and screamed, cajoled and counselled to get what she wanted out of the cast. He'd finally been able to bring in some stage hands, and it was about bloody time; the show went up in three weeks, and he wanted it running like a Swiss watch. There wouldn't be any mistakes or accidents with this show.

Barry had flapped around about security, but Mayne was there, and could see the point of getting the stage hands in a week early, even if it cost more. Ed had been lucky with his mate at NIDA, who'd put the word out and found four eager beavers who were delighted to work with famous actors and a renowned director for free. They'd come in on Wednesday to bump the set in, starting at some obscenely early hour. They'd been absolutely fucked when they finished on Friday afternoon, but after this weekend break it would be full-on until the opening, so they'd better get used to early mornings and late finishes.

Linda came up the steps to the veranda from where she'd been walking in the garden and took a beer from the esky by Ed's chair. "Penny for your thoughts?" she said as she sat down next to him.

"I wasn't thinking all that much, to tell you the truth. Just enjoying the view. And the peace and quiet."

"Yeah, it's lovely, isn't it?" She opened her beer and took a sip from it. "I wouldn't mind living in a place like this, someday."

"That's a change. I always thought you were a city girl."

She shrugged and looked out over the water. "People do change. It'd be good to have somewhere to come back to, to call home." For the first time he could remember, there was wistfulness in her voice.

Ed reached over and put his hand on hers. "I know what you mean." He thought about places they'd been, things they'd done and all the good times and not so good times. With surprise, he found he too

wasn't looking forward to travelling on. He looked across at her and smiled. "Too many suitcases in too many halls, maybe. Yeah, I wouldn't mind buying a place like this somewhere. Maybe down in Tassie."

"Cold down there."

"I get a bit fed up with heat, these days." He laughed. "Remember that show we did about three years ago, in that little place in Brisbane? Summer, no air-conditioning and it was a bloody Moliere comedy in period costume."

"Jesus, yes. *Le Medicin Melagre Lui*."

"Ripping their costumes off as soon as they could, too hot for underwear and the green room full of naked people standing in front of a fan as soon as the bows were taken."

"Terry in the bio box in his jocks, trying to keep his sweat out of the circuits."

"That young actress, what was her name?"

"Lola Gruitt."

"Yes. Stripping and pouring a bucket of water over her head, stark naked, makeup running down her face, just as her mum came backstage to congratulate her."

They laughed together and Linda squeezed his hand. "We've had some good times, haven't we?" Her voice was quiet and full of affection.

"Yeah, we have, love, we have." Ed looked across at her, full of wishes. *Maybe this could be the one where we could settle down*, he thought. *It might not be too late to stop travelling for a while, start a family before we're too old. Do some of the things that normal people do, like have a home.*

Adam came up the steps. "Something sounds amusing. You haven't found one of my serious critical articles in an academic magazine, have you?"

"No, just reminiscing," Ed said.

"Yeah, some of the fun we've had."

Adam grabbed a beer and sat down opposite them. "Tess told me to bugger off and stop ruining the barbie, so I thought I'd come up and find out what the laughter was about. Glad to find it was celebrating good times. You must have had a few."

"Yeah," Ed said. "There were a few rough patches, too."

“God, yes,” Linda said. “Remember Mexico?”

“What happened in Mexico?”

Ed shook his head. “That was a dangerous bugger. We’re two days away from opening a casino show in La Paz and half a dozen guys turn up with guns. Seems that the casino had borrowed heavily from the local mob to put on the show, and they hadn’t kept up their payments. The guys with guns wanted cash or kind, right that second.”

“Jesus!”

“Yeah, it was a tense hour or two. That was one show that didn’t go up at all, because both the casino managers were carted away by the gangsters, and word got back to us that we should pack up our personal possessions and leave, right then and there. Leave the set, the costumes, everything. We got in a bus, all of us, and headed up to Tijuana and the States. Didn’t stop until we got to San Diego.” He took a sip of his beer. “I just hope Mayne’s bloody kept up his payments.”

“Does that sort of thing happen often?” Adam wondered.

“Not often, but there’s always been a connection between theatre and the underworld. Sometimes it’s a way of laundering money, sometimes it’s a way of getting a girlfriend a part. Happens more in the States than here.”

“Like in *Kiss Me, Kate*.”

Ed laughed again. “Yeah. Fiction isn’t that much stranger than truth.”

Linda said “But that’s a fun show to do. Remember that one in Italy? In Palermo, of all places.”

“Christ, that one was mob connected. We had some naturals turn up for the gangster parts. And the *voices*; it was more opera than musical.”

“And at the end of the run we were invited to dinner at that man’s place up in the hills. I’m sure he was mafia.”

“Yeah, well, there were a few armed guards at the fence line, and everyone treated him with a lot of respect.” He laughed again. “The food was good, though. And the wine.”

Adam looked across at them. “How long have you two been together, if you don’t mind me asking?”

They looked at each other. “We met at the Adelaide Festival eight, nearly nine years ago,” Linda said.

“Linda was working for a modern ballet, and I was managing *Waiting for Godot*.”

“Wasn’t much of a ballet company,” she said, “and much more primitive than modern. Lots of writhing around and stomping in frou-frou costumes. I was working my arse off repairing them after every performance, and I came to the end of my tether as the show came to the end of its run.”

“And our glances met across a crowded room.”

“Yeah, it was the bar at the Arts Centre, and it was two bleary stares at one in the morning.”

“I spilled my drink on her . . .”

“Guinness, no less.”

“And when I offered to pay for the cleaning she ripped her blouse off and threw it in my face, stomped off and told me I could suck it dry. I found out where she was staying from some of the dancers, washed the thing at an all-night laundrette and took it around to her the next morning.”

“He knocked on my door when I had a hangover of nuclear dimensions and held up a perfectly spotless peasant blouse. He’d even ironed it. He also had about a litre of coffee and a bag of Danish. How could you not fall in love with a man like that?”

Adam held up his beer and saluted them with it. “Sounds like you two were made for each other.”

A woman’s voice called up to them. “Come on down, you lot, and bring the Esky. It’s ready.”

OoO

Tess was plump and pretty, mid twenties and no nonsense. She smiled as she put the meat on a platter and brought it to the table where the salads and bread were already laid. “Don’t listen to any of dad’s bullshit,” she said. “He’s nowhere near as good as he pretends to be.”

Adam pulled a stubby out of the Esky and handed it to her. “You’ve met my loving daughter?” he asked. “I dare not show any sign of mental instability, or she’ll have me shipped off to a home somewhere and take control of my fortune.”

“What fortune? Get stuck in or the meat’ll get cold.”

“I brought her up in the finest intellectual and artistic traditions, and all she does is abuse me.”

“You need a bit of abuse, and it’s your turn to milk the goats in the morning.”

“I was going to take Ed fishing.”

“Well, you’d better milk the goats early.”

"I don't suppose I could trade a couple of jewfish for goat milking duty?"

"It's a certainty that the goats need milking, and it's nowhere near a certainty that you'll catch a couple of jewies. If you do catch them, you'll bring them home anyway, so it's a win-win situation for me if you milk the goats as well."

"Don't educate your girl children," he told Ed and Linda. "Just send them to a good private school where they'll be taught how to be ladies and how to marry wealthy merchants, so that they can look after their dad in his dotage."

They sat at the table and forked meat onto their plates. "I haven't been to a decent barbie for a long time," Ed said. He raised his beer. "Thanks, Tess."

"Don't mention it. I had to get dad out of the way or the chops would be burnt and the snags underdone."

"My deft touch is unappreciated."

Tess piled some salad on her plate. "Tony called earlier. He'll be down in a week on leave."

"Tony's my son," Adam explained. "He's in the army."

"What branch?" Ed asked.

"Defence Signals Department. He's a lieutenant."

"I thought they were down in Canberra."

"He's part of a team up at Richmond, at the air base. Been there for a year now. All very hush-hush and secret, monitoring the airwaves. He reckons it's about as exciting as watching rocks."

"These salads are lovely," Linda said. "Thanks Tess."

"Help yourself to more."

"I will. You get so sick of restaurant food."

"That's the truth," Ed said. "We might get a flat, if the show runs for a while."

"It should." Adam helped himself to another sausage. "It'll have a bit of controversy to help it along, and it looks like it'll be a strong production."

"I thought you said it wasn't one of Shakespeare's top plays," Ed said

Adam shook his head. "It's not. That doesn't mean it's a bad play, far from it. Even in things like *Timon of Athens* you get patches of brilliance, and a lot of this play is good. A couple of the soliloquies, particularly when Henry's admitting his guilt and pleading for forgiveness in the third act, are right up there. Roland's a great character, sleazier than Iago, not as ballsy as Edmund, smart as a weasel. The plot's good, which is why I wonder where Willy stole it, but some of the stuff is just clunky. The ghost of Richard is great, too, when he makes that vicious accusation speech. But that's just it." He waved a fork at them. "Everything stops for the denunciations. The whole play comes to a grinding halt to hammer Henry, and there's something like that in every act. It's as if Shakespeare had a real down on Henry, for some reason."

"How does it match up with the historical Henry?" Tess asked.

Adam leaned back in his chair and took a pull at his beer. "The history is a bit confused. It certainly doesn't match up with the Henry at the end of *Richard III*. As far as we can tell, Henry wasn't a bad king, at all. He wasn't loony or a real megalomaniac, and he did the one thing that most of England wanted, by that time. He ended the Wars of the Roses." His voice became more meditative. "But who can really tell? History's not an exact science, by any means. We have records of the time, but many records were written by people who either owed Henry or were scared of him. He wasn't one to cross, by all accounts."

"How so?"

"He knew his rule was pretty shaky, so he took steps to make it more secure. He declared himself king retrospectively, so that anybody who'd fought against him was guilty of treason, married Katherine of York and repealed a thing called the Titus Regulus, thereby giving his wife and him a better claim to the throne." He laughed. "Jesus, it was a bloody mess in England around the end of the fifteenth century. Half the nobles had been killed off by Richard, and Henry saw off a few more. The country was just about bankrupt, because the war had gone on for generations, along with a few little adventures in France. Edward IV's kids, Edward and Richard, the Princes in the Tower, had a better claim to the throne than Henry, but they were missing, presumed dead. There were rebellions, starting just after his accession in 1486, another one in 1487, and then the Perkin Warbeck affairs of '95 and '97. He had Edward of Warwick executed in '99, and he pretty much bugged anyone who was suspected of Plantagenet sympathies. He got rid of the private armies and made sure the nobles paid big taxes, and made sure the Pope diminished the power of sanctuary, so his enemies couldn't claim it. He brought back the Star Chamber to try cases quickly, and pretty much give the verdicts he wanted."

"Why do you say he wasn't a bad king, then?" Ed asked. "He sounds like a bit of a bastard."

“Compared to some, he was gentle as a lamb and wise as Solomon. He made England rich again, established a navy and made sure there was a Justice of the Peace in every town. His foreign policy got England out of some bloody stupid adventures and ended wars with France for a while, getting some cash for that into the bargain. He handed his son a country that was back on its feet and ready to go into continued growth. What the play does is throw doubts on his legitimacy and that of his heirs. It also develops a lovely little sub-plot with Roland de Velville and Catherine of Aragon having an affair that continued well after Henry’s death.”

“How does it throw doubts on the legitimacy?”

“There’s the scene in act two where Richard’s ghost haunts Henry. Richard says he didn’t have the kids killed; instead they were stolen away from the tower by Buckingham before he rebelled against Richard, in order for them to be bargaining chips with Henry. If those kids were still alive somewhere, they had a better claim to the throne than Henry or any of his heirs, particularly when Elizabeth died without issue. So would their children.” He tossed his empty stubby into a bin and reached for another. “There’s also a hint in the play that Elizabeth wasn’t Henry’s kid, but Roland’s. That really would have put the cat among the pigeons if it was true.”

“This is all sounding like some Dumas novel,” Linda said.

“*L’Homme au Masque de Fer*, maybe. The problem would be where the kids were hidden, and why weren’t they brought forward earlier, why Perkin Warbeck was supported by France when they knew he was an impostor. If Buckingham really did spirit them away, as the play suggests, he would have had to keep them very safe, very discreet, because their lives wouldn’t have been worth a plugged nickel if Henry’d found them.”

“Yeah, and your life won’t be worth a plugged nickel if you don’t get those goats milked in the morning,” Tess said. “Try to remember that the entire world isn’t a lecture theatre, hey?” She smiled across at Ed and Linda. “It’s one of the dangers of living with an academic; they do love to talk about their subject.”

“‘So young and so untender.’ You’ll wind up without any of my kingdom if you keep on like that.”

“Yeah, I know; ‘Nothing comes from nothing.’ Dad, you’ve got a lot of books, the flat in town, this place and twenty goats that expect your hands on their tits tomorrow morning, plus a bit of superannuation. I’ll be fifty before I get any of it, if at all, so the threat’s not a big one.” She came around and kissed him on the top of the head as she gathered up the plates. “But you’re not getting any younger, and you’d better get to bed sometime soon if you want to be up early enough to take Ed fishing.”

Ed stood up and gave Tess a hand with the plates and cutlery while Linda took the salads in to the fridge. "I'll give you a hand with the goats, if you want," he said to Adam.

"You ever milked goats before?"

"No."

"Then it's a very generous offer and I'll take advantage of it. I'll knock on your door at half past five."

"Just don't knock too hard and wake me up," Linda called from inside. "I want to have a sleep in tomorrow."

OoO

They were in a fourteen foot wooden dinghy in the buttery early light. It was peaceful, no traffic on the roads and most people were still in bed on a Saturday morning. The water was very still, black as ink, and there wasn't a breeze to cause even a ripple on the surface. The sky had the glow that comes just before the sun really rises, a soft pink and gold that misted the clouds. The trees were utterly motionless, dark, unruly masses on the shore.

They'd rowed out while it was still pitch black, Adam in bow with a lantern and Ed on the oars. Now they were anchored with their lines stretching out into the silent water. Ed said, "You didn't tell me we'd be using a machine to milk the goats."

"You didn't think I was going to do it by hand? It'd take bloody hours."

It had taken, in fact, about thirty minutes, and they were in mid-river by half-past six. "What happens to the milk now?"

"It's chilled down in the storage tank and we'll start making cheese of it later on today."

"Don't you have to pasteurise it, or something?"

"We're supposed to, but I won't be putting this lot out for general consumption. I reckon that pasteurisation spoils the flavour. Now be quiet; you'll scare the fish."

They sat in companionable silence for a while, and then Adam reeled in his line and cursed softly. "Bloody bait's gone. There are bream around here, but they're being a bit cunning. Pass the bait, will you. I wouldn't mind a coffee, as well, if you'll pass the thermos."

"I'll have one when you're finished with it."

Adam nodded, baited his line again and dropped it over the side. He poured a coffee into an old enamel mug and passed it over to Ed, then poured one for himself. "What do you reckon about Mayne?" he asked.

"I don't know a lot about him. Used to be rich as Croesus, self-made man, started out selling used cars. Pretty much pulled the pin a couple of years ago and retired young. Lost a lot in a divorce and through some bad investment. But that's just what's been in the papers over the years."

"What do you think of him as a person, now that you've met him?"

Ed considered while he pulled up his line and checked his bait. His was still there, but he replaced it with a new one anyway. "Cool operator. He wasn't fazed at all by Madelyn, kept his own pace and his own agenda."

"Yeah. He struck me that way, too. Reckon he's honest?"

"Yeah. I reckon he is."

Adam nodded. "That's my impression, as well. He wants me to do something for him."

"What?"

"He wants me to edit a new edition of the complete works of Shakespeare. In fact, he wants me to be the editor-in-chief of a whole new Shakespeare publishing company."

Ed gaped. "That'd be a big job. You'd have to give up lecturing."

"The funny thing is I could do that and stay on staff. I've got tenure. But the problem is whether he's got what he says he's got, or whether he's just bullshitting."

"What's that?"

Adam jerked at his line and then pulled steadily on it for a moment. He paused, then brought in an empty hook. "Bugger. I thought I had one." He rebaited his hook and threw the line back in. "Mayne told me that he didn't just find the one play. He found the complete works, as given by Shakespeare to his patron and friend, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. The lot, along with letters and journals. Apparently he reckoned they'd be safer with Wriothesley than back home in Stratford."

"How'd they get to Mayne?"

"Long story. Mayne did a bit of detective work to find out, but it looks like Wriothesley died, along with his son, in Holland and the ship that was taking his possessions back to England was taken by a Spanish ship on its way to the new world. That ship seems to have caught fire and sunk, but the box

with the documents was in a chest of sealing wax, and that melted, preserving it while it was underwater. Some fisherman found it, Mayne bought it, opened it, and the genius was out of the box.”

“Sounds bloody unlikely to me.”

“Yeah, me too. That’s why I want to see the originals. Mayne’s had them authenticated by some Japanese and Russian experts, but I want to see them for myself before I commit.” He played the line for a few seconds. “One of those buggers is nibbling at the bait right now.”

“Mayne’s seemed to be pretty straight to me in the little I’ve had to do with him. He gets on with Maddy, as well, and she’s got a pretty good nose for bullshit.”

“Yeah, well, it could be the biggest bloody shake-up in Shakespeare scholarship of all time.” He pulled in his baitless line and cursed. “Chuck a handful of burley in, will you?”

Ed did so. “Why the shake-up?”

“Because we’d have the actual texts, the way they were intended to be seen. We’ve never had that.”

“I thought there were standard editions. There were when I was in high school.”

“Those standard editions vary. They probably recommended one publisher over another, so they could keep down the conflicts. There’ve been so many versions, over the years. Tate re-wrote *King Lear*, Bowdler put out *The Family Shakespeare*, all 230 surviving editions of the First Folio differ in detail, it left out *Pericles*, the sources for the plays are doubtful in many cases, it was cut on order of the Master of Revels, and then there are the quarto editions, the later Folios, the False Folio, lost plays, bloody *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and Uncle Tom Cobley and all. It’s a bloody mess, and Mayne’s discovery could sort it all out. If it’s for real.”

“Why would Mayne fake it?”

Adam laughed. “Money, mate, money. He could push out his only true version, ‘Mayne’s Folio,’ and every college, every school in the world would want one. He could flog them to schools and to everyone who’s interested in Shakespeare. But he could only do it once. That’s why there’s all the secrecy around the play, why all the actors have only got part scripts. That’s why it’s locked up very safely in a location No-one but Mayne knows. Once it’s out, it’s in the public domain, and any backyard press can pump out their own edition.”

Ed’s mobile rang and he pulled it out, listened briefly, grunted a few times and folded it back up. He lifted his head and said, “Fuck!” loud enough to set a few birds fluttering in the trees on shore.

“What’s up?”

“We’d better get back,” Ed said, a grim expression on his face. He grabbed the anchor and began to haul it up. “Someone’s bloody set fire to the Liz.”

FOREWORD TO AS YOU LIKE IT, DATED 1594.

My most gracious and esteemed lord, my great friend, the fault in all these matters, these tawdry doings of lust and treachery and death, were in all regards not a whit of your doing. You were innocent, not knowing how those who worked the fates of high and low born, those who twisted the glass of heaven to shine awry, would take their vengeance for sins perceived. Kit was the dusty comic who said one word too many, made one jest too caustic, took a step too far into the dusky world of betrayals and trusted a fate that saw him die in Deptford at the hands of a sinner in employ of your old guardian, Burgleigh. Without his devil's bargain with Walsingham, there was none to save him, none to take his part and plead caution, though I did.

It was, indeed, "a great reckoning in a little room," and it was, in part, because of his pursuit of your good and noble self, the continuance of lust from Cambridge, but it was more of his loud speech, his bravado in heresies of the browner sort, which caused the call for the knife to enter his eye. He was a Touchstone by which a heart may be judged, a merit of whimsy and wit, and a he urged his own death.

"for the truest poetry is the most feigning; and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign."

If he had kept to this he would yet our Touchstone be, a poet and a lover. Yet he is dead, and my sadness at this loss could only be mouthed with a player's lips, dragging a heart across a little stage, that was once his world.

CHAPTER NINE

The trip back to shore was punctuated by Ed alternately cursing and asking questions on his mobile. He hung up as they neared the little jetty and Adam tossed a rope over a piling.

“That was Marco, who seems to be the only fucking person there who’s still compos. Barry’s flapping around yelling and weeping alternately, Madelyn is screaming at everyone in sight and Mayne can’t be found; he went to Queensland for the weekend, for some reason god alone knows.” Ed took a deep breath and continued. “Marco doesn’t know what all the damage is, but the sets are gone, totally fucked. The fire was backstage and spread from there to the set.”

“Jesus! What happened?”

“Nobody knows how it started. The cops and firies are investigating it now. It didn’t spread into the auditorium because the fire curtain was down, but smoke got in there. Terry’s up checking the lights now. But that’s not the biggest problem; if it got to the stage lights it was only the ones that were hung on battens. Marco reckons the flies are stuffed.”

Adam concentrated on tying up the boat. He climbed on to the jetty and offered Ed a hand up. Linda and Tess came running down from the house.

“Have you heard?” Linda yelled.

“Yeah. I just got off the ‘phone with Marco. Auditorium’s okay, sets are charcoal and the flies’re bugged, he reckons.”

“What about the costumes? I do *not* want to try to get them made all over again.”

“He reckoned the wardrobe’s alright. It’s down below the stage, and the door was closed. The fire was at stage level.”

“I’ll drive you back down,” Tess said. “I know the shortcuts. I’ll organise my nurse to look after the goats for a few days.”

“Nurse?”

“I’m the local vet. Louise likes looking after the goats; she reckons it gets her out of the house.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, let’s get going. Dad can bring your things down with him.”

Ed nodded his thanks and tossed Adam the car keys. "Just come straight to the Liz. We won't be anywhere else." He grabbed Linda and ran to the Land cruiser while Tess climbed in and started up.

OoO

Tess kept her foot flat to the boards all the way, cutting down side roads that Ed and Lisa would have sworn led nowhere, but somehow brought them back to the main road faster than anyone would have thought possible. She'd called ahead to one of her mates and there was a punt waiting for them with its ramp down at the ferry wharf and they drove straight on to it. Fifteen minutes later they were on the Old Northern Road, heading for Beecroft. "There's no point trying the freeway," she yelled over the rattle of the road, "it'll be packed with weekend traffic, and then we hit the suburbs at Hornsby. This is faster."

It was. They got back to the theatre in half the time it had taken them to get to Spencer. There were fire engines and police cars outside the Liz, plus the usual crowd of journalists and hangers-on. Ed identified himself to the cops and was allowed through the cordon to the backstage entrance. There was no smoke or steam anymore but water ran from the loading gate into the gutters. Marco sat on the outside step, smoking a cigarette. He looked up.

"How bad is it?" Ed said as he got out of the car.

Marco threw his cigarette down and ground it out with his boot. "It's pretty fucking bad. The flats are bugged, but that's something I could fix before the dress. From what I could see the flies are a wreck. The fly tower acted like a chimney and half of them burnt through before the sprinklers went on. The galleries look okay, so you could go up and take a look. Just avoid Madelyn; she's ready to gut someone."

Ed and Linda went inside. There were still a few firemen rolling up hoses and things, but nobody warned them to stay away. The air reeked of smoke and damp ashes. The workers were on, so the electrics weren't stuffed, but the light they cast didn't reveal anything good. Fly bars dangled from the remains of the rigging, and tattered flats hung like dismal flags from them. There was water underfoot everywhere, and Ed just hoped that the ceilings on the rooms below were tight. The stage was scorched where the burning flats had landed, but the layers of old paint had protected it a little. They went up the stair to the first gallery. Terry was up there, checking some wiring. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder and said "Take a look."

Ed went up while Linda went below stage to check the costumes. The flies were ruined. Those that hadn't burned through were badly scorched, and the ropes were dangling above them like some insane jungle gym. Ed looked up further and saw that the fire had even reached up to the pulleys. The cables would have to be taken down, replaced and re-rovved, the bars would have to be replaced, the

pulleys replaced. It wasn't a question of repair, Ed thought, but total replacement. Everything. He picked up a piece of charred canvas that had somehow come to rest on the gallery rail. It had bright gold and blue painted on it, part of a fleur-de-lis and part of a heraldic lion, smudged with smoke. He smoothed it with his hand, smearing the dark stains.

Terry finished checking the wiring and joined him at the rail. "Are we fucked?" he asked.

Ed nodded, staring at the piece of canvas. Christ, he thought, it could have been so good.

"The lights are okay, but the wiring for the sound system ran down this channel on the wall. It melted into a single piece of plastic. I can fix it, but it will take weeks."

Ed nodded again, then sighed. He tossed the piece of canvas down to the rest of the rubble. "Come on; we'd better go down and talk to the others."

They had to go outside and around to the foyer to find Madelyn and Barry. Madelyn was on her mobile to some luckless answering service person. "I don't care if Mayne is out of 'phone contact. Send a fucking helicopter to find him. Then tell him to get his arse down here. Tell him we've got a cast a crew and a script, but there's no fucking theatre." She listened for a moment, then said in a low voice, "Trixiabelle, or whatever your trailer-trash name is, I am going to come up there to your office, grab you by your bleached-blond hair, drag you down to this smoking ruin and barbecue your arse in the ashes if you don't get on the job right now and *find Mayne!*" The last two words were shouted at a volume that made Barry wince as he came over to Ed and Linda. He opened his mouth to say something, but Madelyn beat him to it.

"Well?"

"There's no way we can go up in time. It'll take months to fix the flies and Terry says it will take weeks to fix the sound system."

"Fuck."

She turned away, and no-one was game to say anything until she turned back. She had a look about her that demanded answers, not more questions. "Is the auditorium okay?"

Ed nodded. "Fire didn't get into it at all. Needs a good airing to get the smell of smoke out, but that's all."

To Linda: "Costumes?"

"They're fine. Same thing, smell of smoke, but they can be cleaned."

To Ed: "When can we get onto the stage?"

He shrugged. "Stage isn't damaged, as far as I can see. If the fire department gives permission, I can get it checked out and cleaned up by tomorrow afternoon."

"I need a thrust stage built out into the first five rows. How long?"

Ed considered. "By tomorrow. I'll pull the seats out, rig scaffolding and put a deck on it." He looked across at Barry. "It will cost a bit, though."

To Barry she said: "Get on the 'phone and call the cast. They're rehearsing tomorrow afternoon, one o'clock start. Get me Marco. I'll meet him in the bar. Then hire an orchestra that can play Elizabethan music."

To all of them: "We are going to restage this show. We're going to do it the way it would have been done in Shakespeare's time. And we *will* go up on time. Now get to it."

Christ, Ed thought, let's just do it right here in the barn.

OoO

The first hurdle was to get permission from the fire department to work on the stage. They were still investigating how the fire started. "It looks like it was set deliberately," the man in charge of the investigation said, "which makes this a crime scene. The forensic crew has to come in and do their thing."

"How long?"

"They'll be on their way right now. Don't know how long they'll take to check the area."

"Look, is it the whole stage that they have to check? Or can we start work on clearing up this mess?"

"Well, the fire started over there," he pointed to upstage right, near what had been the proscenium, below the manager's office, "and travelled up and across. The other side," he pointed to stage right, "isn't of concern to us. You could start clearing up over there."

"Can we start getting the water out?"

"Yeah. I'll put tape around the no-go area."

"I want to cut away those damaged flies. Okay?"

The man nodded his permission and went to set up the restricted area.

Ed had called in all the stage crew and they started to arrive in dribs and drabs. Mick was one of the first to arrive, so Ed put him in charge of cutting away the damaged flies and went to find Terry. He was up in the bio box, testing circuits.

“We’re bloody lucky,” he said as Ed came in. “The only lights we lost were those mounted on the far batten to down light the cyc, plus a few of the cans on the floor. All the circuits are okay bar about six, and that’s probably because the sockets melted. I can replace those in a couple of hours.”

“What about the sound?”

“Totally fucked for everything beyond the curtain. The circuits are gone, the speakers are gone, even the PA is gone. I can give you some sound in the auditorium, but only from the very back speakers. Those are the only ones that didn’t lead through the backstage junction box.”

“Mikes?”

“Haven’t checked them yet, but I wouldn’t hold out a lot of hope.”

Ed looked out through the bio box window. *Christ, he thought, who would light a fire in this place? Disappointed actor? Jealous producer? One of those Shakespeare-wasn’t-Shakespeare nuts?* He shook his head. Who set the fire wasn’t his problem right now. He had enough to do to clean up the stage and start building the thrust. It was Saturday afternoon and he had to start calling people.

0o0

It was evening, and the theatre was noisy with workers. Ed had called a mate at a building company, and he’d put Ed on to some riggers. The shops were still open on Saturday afternoon, so he’d tracked down a builders’ supplier who could deliver the scaffolding and decking to the Liz then and there, even though it was at a premium rate. He grinned at the memory of what had happened when Barry had timidly protested about the cost of the penalty rates. The mildest of it had been as Madelyn walked off swearing that if the rat-faced little faggot opened his mouth one more time about the expense he wouldn’t need to shell out for the cost of a sex-change operation because she’d rip his balls off for free. She’d calmed down after talking with Marco about the brand-new stage design. He said he could do it, and he could have the whole thing finished a week before the dress, if nobody else tried to set fire to the place. It was going to be an open stage, with seats for the actors upstage on a rake, as if they were another audience. Props would be on a table up centre, and the actors would simply pick most of them up from there. The wings and backstage would be masked by fixed black tabs. He was going to paint some banners and flags that could be raised to indicate different settings. Simple, but it focused attention on the action. Actors would be responsible for some of the scene

changes, and all the stage directions would be different. Actors would even change costume behind a screen on stage.

Ed had kept his head down in the bio box and organized the new props list. It would be a lot simpler, because the production would be stripped to the bone. He thought Madelyn must either be very confident in her cast by now, or very desperate, because it would all be up to them to create the grand illusion. Some of them could carry it off. Others would struggle. Madelyn would work their arses off. But they were pros, and they were used to short rehearsal periods. All except Redmond. This might be the point where he'd crack. That might be sad. Leon was good, no doubt, but Redmond was getting better every day, thanks to Henry's tutelage. It could be a close finish.

Terry was fiddling with the lights, trying to work out which existing lights he could use for the new stage and which he'd have to change. He went down to the manager's office to get some plotting paper. When he got back he said "Ed, has anyone been in the office?"

"No, not as far as I know. They've all been milling around downstairs."

"The door was unlocked."

Ed came over. "Maybe Barry came in and left it unlocked when he went out."

"Maybe."

They worked on in silence for a while, then Terry said "Do you reckon this is going to be one of those unlucky shows?"

Ed put his pencil down on the pad and stretched to ease his back a little. "It's been okay so far, apart from the fire. Went well right up to that. Doesn't have that scratchy feeling with the cast, either."

"Yeah, cast are good, crew are good, theatre's good, just a bit burnt around the edges. But I remember that *Death of a Salesman* we did up in Brisbane. Another old theatre, nice cast and crew, everything going well, then we hit the day before the dress, and the whole thing started to go to pieces."

Ed thought about it. There were a lot of reasons a show could go bad; bad direction, lazy crew, lack of experience, poor equipment, bitchy cast. A lot. And it was his job to handle them all, as tactfully as possible. He'd had people crying on his shoulder, both male and female, nudged directors into slightly different management strategies when they were making everybody hate them, hidden lines on bits of paper around the set when people just could not remember their lines, faked sound effects when tapes broke, held a set together as a living clamp when the ties broke, put up a barrier of sandbags from the back of the flats to stop a flood when a shower had broken in the middle of an act, put up with drunk actors, neurotic actors, actors in and out of love and a few fistfights. He'd seen Terry

string lights while he hung on with one hand from the ceiling, set levels and plot on the fly when they'd all been altered by someone, improvise background music from his ipod when the tape machine blew up. Linda had coped with torn costumes, wet costumes, bloody costumes and wrong costumes. She'd once stripped off her jeans and given them to an actress when the right ones had gone missing, and worked the rest of the show in her knickers. They'd all helped with makeup, food, drink and had been counsellors and confidants. Theatre was a world of illusion, where every performance was a tightrope, and you had to trust someone, there had to be someone who was the rock, and that was him. When the director threw the script against the wall and walked out, it was the stage manager who had to fetch them back and pick up the pages. When an actor chucked a tizzy, it was the stage manager who had to go backstage and talk them out of suicide. It was the stage manager who had to find out what pub the orchestra hid in and get them out in time for the show.

Sometimes, Ed thought, it would be nice to have the freedom to be pissed off.

That *Death*. Utter chaos, right from the beginning. The director was tearing his hair out and giving frantic notes after every show, which were all ignored. Houses fell off, and the show closed early, much to Ed's relief.

"I remember it," he replied to Terry, "but that's not going to happen to this show."

He hoped he was right.

CHAPTER TEN

Mayne got back on Sunday morning from his trip to Queensland. He'd already been apprised of the situation by Barry, but Madelyn gave him a resume of it in her terms, which were somewhat more colorful. At the end of the diatribe, Mayne walked out onto the new forestage and looked around. He spotted Ed in the wings and nodded to him. Then he walked back to Madelyn and Barry.

"Madelyn, Barry, can we talk in the office? Ed," he called out, "could you come too?"

The office still smelled of smoke, but nothing appeared to be damaged. Mayne sat down behind the desk and waved the others into seats. "Barry, could you close the door," he said.

He looked at them. "I need to know whether we can go up on time. Madelyn?"

"These guys are pros, but we're restaging the whole show. Marco won't have the drapes ready for at least another week. The lines are down, even Redmond's, by some miracle, and they were movement perfect on the old stage, apart from Redmond, who still bumped into the furniture. That's a plus and a minus. They're in this afternoon and we'll walk to the chalk lines, but they'll have to get rid of the old moves and learn a new set. Their characters have been developed, and some of them are as good as I want them to be. Redmond is still wooden, but he's getting better. Short answer; maybe. It depends on how quick everything else happens." She folded her arms and stared at him. "It would be a more definite maybe if I swapped Leon into Redmond's role."

"What part could Kevin play then?"

"Third fucking spear carrier from the left," Madelyn exploded. "It's just as well that we had a long rehearsal period to start with, because he wouldn't even have his lines down. He walks like a cowboy and he sounds like a redneck. He's so used to playing himself on screen that he can't play any other part, no matter how much Hank and the others help him. I've tried, by god I've tried, and he might have made it if he didn't have to learn a whole new set, but now, he's a hindrance, and Leon could walk into the part in a New York minute." She stared at Mayne. "I want Leon to do Roland."

Mayne stared right back. "That's not an option. Kevin stays in the part."

"Then I can't fucking guarantee that we'll go up on time."

Mayne shifted his gaze to Ed. "How is it from your side?"

Ed shifted a little. He felt uncomfortable. He'd only had hours to get the new stage up and it still hadn't been certified, although he wasn't worried about that. The riggers had done a good job. But there were other things. "The new stage will be okay, and Terry's working on the lights right now, he

thinks they'll be ready in time. Backstage sound is stuffed, but we can probably improvise a radio rig for an intercom. So, we've got stage, lights and comms, no music or effects. I can get the new floor plan onto the stage as soon as Marco delivers it. With luck, we'll be ready, but the margin's thin."

"Thanks Ed. Barry?"

"Oh, god; I don't know. I've got the front of house staff on call and they'll be ready, I just need a day to run through the arrangements with them. But the live music instead of recorded . . . I don't know. It's like taking on half a dozen new actors, and we're already over budget."

Madelyn turned on him. "I told you not to fucking mention money anymore. The show goes up or it doesn't, and we spend the money to get it to go up. This show is more important than money."

"Well, that may be true, Madelyn," Mayne said, "but the fact is that if we run out of money, there won't be any show."

She turned back to Mayne, leaned forward and thrust her hands onto the desk. "Well, you'll just have to sign another check to bankroll it, won't you? You've paid top dollar to get the cast, the crew and me, so you can pay out a few more dollars for musicians. Hell, most of them will work for beer and chips and a place to keep warm at night."

"Right now, I suspect we might only be able to afford the beer and chips."

"You're a fucking millionaire!" she yelled. "Use the money for something worthwhile, for a change. You'll make another bundle out of the play, for Christ's sake. You can afford it."

Mayne was very quiet for a moment, then he said "Madelyn, we're just about broke, and I'm already broke, an ex-millionaire."

"What?"

He looked at the others, and for once his calmness deserted him. "I'm fucking broke!" He took a deep breath. "I got out of business after a very messy divorce had cost me a great deal of money. My fault. I was in love, I was in California and I was too stupid to get a pre-nup. She divorced me in Los Angeles, and got half of everything but my balls and my yacht. Figuratively. I had a couple of small nest eggs that I had tucked away in the Bahamas that nobody knew about. Then there was the slight economic downturn."

"To top it off, I left my money in the hands of my financial manager. Ray Sullivan. You might have heard of him."

Ed had. Sullivan was currently spending a minimum of eight years as a guest of Her Majesty for financial fraud. He'd taken more than a few people down with him.

"Ray screwed me. When I found the manuscript, I was on my way to the Bahamas to pick up those little nest eggs because, between Ray and the economy, I was bugged, bankrupt and on the bones of my arse."

"That's not what the papers said," Maddy muttered.

"You have to love journalists. They create a world of what they call news by juggling facts and then try to keep the balls in the air. I'd been rich once, and I hadn't made a big public disaster of myself like Alan Bond, so I must still be rich. I had friends who still invited me to their parties, and I could still get a table in a decent restaurant, so me pissing off on my boat was just a reclusive eccentricity, not someone who was getting out of town fast to avoid debt. They talked about my grand apartment in Rose Bay, but it was a friend's. They talked about the luxury Mercedes I drove, but it was borrowed. The only reason I still had the boat was that I couldn't find a buyer for any reasonable price. Economic downturn, remember?"

Ed said "But this theatre must have cost a bomb. And the budget so far has been enough to get by on, if not exactly generous."

"It's illusion, remember? Plus those little nest eggs. It's a thing called leverage. I buy the theatre, use the equity in this to borrow money to provide the budget for the show. Everything in this theatre, including the theatre itself, is hocked to the hilt, which wouldn't be a problem, because it's a normal way of doing business, except for the due date for the payments. The show has to go up on time, and make a profit from day one, because the first payment is due a little after that."

"Explain to the backers," Madelyn said. "They'll understand."

"That's why I was up in Queensland. The backers are some very serious people, and they have developed doubts."

"How serious are these people?" Ed asked. *Fucking amateurs!* he thought. *It's all bright lights and big city up until they get the rent call. Jesus; how many shows have gone down because the backers were crooks laundering their money?*

"Very."

“Ah.” *Oh, you poor prick*, he thought. *I know exactly the sort of people you mean, because they backed that Jupiter’s show, and they’re bastards who smile a lot. They also have friends in cheap suits who carry guns. But you’re still a fucking amateur.*

Mayne said “I would not want to annoy them.”

“Why the fuck have they developed doubts?” Madelyn said. “This is a classic come to life. Nobody has ever seen this play before. Hell, the first edition of the new manuscripts will be worth millions. That should pay them off.”

Mayne stared hard at her. “Let’s lay our cards on the table. Barry,” he nodded towards him, “hasn’t been involved with a production for two years, after he stuffed up the venue for a big masked ball in Melbourne. You haven’t been working, either. Your last job before this was dramaturge in a small town in Ohio. You’ve developed a reputation for being hard to work with. Most of the cast have been resting for a while. They’re good, but they’ve all had problems getting work. The only people here who’ve had constant work are Ed and his crew, and even they had a show go south on them before this came up. Isn’t that right, Ed?”

Ed nodded. It had been a new play by some experimental theatre group in London, a long way from the West End, and half the cast had walked out just before opening night, too late to recast, too late to do anything but cancel the eight week run. He’d turned down good jobs to do that one.

“And Kevin. You want to dump him and put Leon in his place. Kevin is in this show because his studio is one of the backers. Or rather, a gentleman who lives in Reno who is connected with the studio is one of the backers.”

“So? Let them put him in the movie.”

“And that is another thing which is highly leveraged. There is only an option, at the moment, and it is an option on a property which is not copyright. It is a house of cards, and if this production doesn’t come in on time and be successful, the whole thing will collapse.”

“What about the books?” Ed asked.

“The presses don’t roll until the bills get paid, and the bills don’t get paid until this show makes some money. There is a very narrow window for this to all work, and that window opens on August 22nd.”

“What happens if we miss it?” Madelyn asked.

“I lose the only asset I have, which is the manuscript. It goes to the various backers, and I will not see one red cent from it.”

“But the show will go on?”

“No. One of the problems I have had is that many of the backers are willing to take the money from the books and run. It’s safe, it’s easy and it can be controlled. Whatever you say, this show is a risk.”

“Then why the fuck did you start it? Why didn’t *you* take the money and run, and not get a whole bunch of people involved?”

Mayne gazed at her with a quizzical look on his face. “I would have thought you, of all people, would understand why the show has to be performed. If all goes well, the books will come out under my imprint, and the fact that I found the manuscripts inside a big ball of wax will get me a footnote in the history books. I’m forty-eight, I’ve achieved very little apart from making some money that I then, through optimism, trust and mismanagement, managed to lose. I have no children and an ex-wife who lives in New York with two Chihuahuas and a Portuguese lover. I made the discovery through sheer luck. The books that follow are no more than a simple transcription of text from one form into another, and, from them, a Shakespeare revival will follow. *Henry VII* will be performed all over the world. But I will be first. I will have actually helped to create something that no-one has ever seen before. In all my life, I have never made something, but I will get this show on, and for that I will be remembered, as will all of you.”

Madelyn took her hands off the desk and leaned back in her chair. “You know, you may think that’s something to do with theatre, but it’s not, that was a pure statement of egotism. Even though there are plenty of egotists in theatre, that’s not what it’s about. You don’t love it. It’s just a way for you to wave your dick in the air for everyone to see. But I can work with that, and I don’t care if I’m remembered for this show or any other. *I’ll* remember this show, and I’ll love those memories, the way I love this show. I’ll direct; you take care of the money. If we’re on a tight budget from now on, I can work with that, too. Ed, what about you?”

“Just how tight?”

Barry said “Our ready cash is just about used up when I pay the bills for the new stage. We can pay the actors, Madelyn and the crew up to the opening night. Anything else is going to have to be on credit, and we don’t have a great deal of that.”

Ed said “Okay, I can do some things to ease up the situation. We don’t need to pay the riggers until after the show goes up, and I can delay the payments to the suppliers, as well. We’ll have to get those fans in, but their terms will be thirty days nett, which is after opening. We shouldn’t have any big bills before that. I can cut down on the number of paid stage-hands, too, and we can probably get

away without a dresser. I'll talk to Linda about it. But there will be unforeseen expenses; there always are, and there will have to be a little bit of a slush fund for that."

"Use my salary," Madelyn said. "You can pay me later."

"Mine too," Ed said. That should give you a little more leeway."

Mayne looked down at his hands. "Thank you," he said in a low voice. "Thank you, and I will make it up to you." He looked up at Madelyn. "This may seem like egotism to you, but I've given everything I have to get this show on. I don't want to fail. With your help, we'll all succeed."

Madelyn looked at her watch. "Yeah, right. It's nearly time for the cast to get here, and we've got eleven days to get our shit together, so if we're going to succeed, I'll just waddle on down to the stage and dry their tears before we start rehearsals." She got up and went to the door. Without turning, she said "And I am going to do it my way. I'll keep Kevin, if that's what it takes, but I'll be doing this by the seat of my pants, and if anyone gets in my way, I will go right through them." She left.

OoO

The people from the fire department were finishing up outside. Ed caught up with the man in charge and asked him if they could clean up and get on with the show. He nodded. "It was pretty simple. Someone sprayed accelerant all over the fabric and then poured some into a plastic bucket and chucked in a match. With that fly tower to act as a chimney, the whole thing went up like a Roman candle. They could have been in and out in five minutes, and there's no trace of them left behind after the sprinklers came on and washed it all away. You're lucky, you know." He gestured to the solid brick walls around them. "These old buildings, they take a while to heat up and they don't burn easily. We checked out the roof, and it's still solid. The fire never reached it. From the match being dropped up to the last spark being out was no more than ten minutes, thanks to the bloke who called it in."

"Just long enough to bugger the fly tower."

"I guess. They must have known what they were doing."

Ed went downstairs and organized Mick and a couple of the other mechanists to clean up the stage. He was puzzled. If whoever set the fire had known what they were doing, they'd done it with a fair bit of precision. If they'd set it in the auditorium, the whole theatre would have been totally bugged. Even if they had had unlimited cash, there was no way the seats and the lights could have been replaced in time. They were special order jobs. What, he thought, were they after? A voice came down the stairs. "Coee," it said. "Is there anyone there?"

Ed leaned his broom up against a wall and called out, "Hang on, I'll be right up."

He scrambled up the circular stair to the stage and found a short, chubbily pretty girl with short brown hair waiting at the top. She stuck her hand out. "Rebecca Hamilton-Smythe. I'm one of the NIDA interns. I heard you had a bit of a disaster, so I thought I'd come around a bit early, see if I could lend a hand."

Ed shook her hand. "Any relation to Vice-Admiral Hamilton-Smythe?"

She nodded. "He's my dad." She shrugged. "We don't get on. I haven't spoken to him for about three years."

"Why?"

"He doesn't approve of a good little girl from Rose Bay, educated at Ascham and destined for a wonderful marriage, getting involved with the grubby world of the theatre." She smiled. "He told me that if I didn't give up NIDA and do something useful with my life I was to leave his house. I told him he could jam his house up his naval arse and walked out to a squat in Oxford Street where a few friends were staying."

Ed smiled back. "He always seemed to have a broom up his arse when I knew him in the RAN, as well."

"Oh, since he retired and he hasn't got sailors to boss any more, it's become a stainless steel rod. I love him, because he's my dad, but he's going to have to do a bit of accommodating to get back in communication with me." She looked around. "Linda told me this place was a mess when she let me in, and she wasn't joking. Where can I help?"

"I'm helping the mechs downstairs, so if you could clean up around here, that would be great. Just shove everything towards the loading door; there's a skip coming tomorrow."

She took off the denim jacket she was wearing over a black t-shirt with the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare on it and a legend saying 'I want Willy.' "There's three others coming tomorrow, all second years. All the third years are wound up with the graduation production."

"Aren't you in third year?"

She hung her jacket from a rope tie and said, "Yeah, but I told them I'd drop out of NIDA if they didn't let me work this show. I mean, work with Madelyn Vale? She's a goddess. On a previously unknown Shakespeare play? Double goddess. I told them they could assess me on my work with this show, and walked out."

“You seem to do that a lot.”

“Only when someone tries to get in my way. Don’t worry, though,” she grabbed a burnt piece of set and began to lug it towards the loading door, “I won’t walk out on this show. I’ve waited for this all my life.”

Damn, Ed thought as he walked back downstairs, *I hope she stays*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The rehearsal was a disaster. The whole cast, including, strangely enough, Henry, was so rattled by the situation that they fluffed lines they'd had pat two days ago. They moved like automatons and had the emotional range of guppies. The strangest thing was that, of all of them, Redmond was the least affected. He was still unsure, but he seemed to have grown unshakably into the character. It was still Roland de Velville light, but it was coming.

Something else had to come, and it did at around three in the afternoon, after five hours without a break. Claire kicked a chair and screamed at Madelyn "I need a piss! I need a break! I need to eat something! We all do! Let us take a break for ten minutes, for Christ's sake."

Madelyn got up from her seat in the twelfth row and started to walk down to the stage. The seats seemed to lean away from her and the stage shook. Her hands were balled into fists and there was blood in her eye. She was Shiva the Destroyer, and there was going to be blood. Claire raised one hand to her mouth, appalled by what she'd done to raise this particular demon at this particular time. They all froze, cast, crew, everyone. Barry looked as if he wanted to hide under a table. Linda sat rigid where she'd been taking notes, mouth agape. Even Ed, who was backstage with Mick, couldn't think of a way to stop the impending impalement. This is it, he thought, this is where the show closes. If Madelyn destroys Claire, right here, right now, she'll never get the rest of them back in time. You're only as good as your last show, he thought, and this cock-up might be his last show.

Then Redmond stepped forward.

"Fuck you," he shouted at Claire. "We're *all* tired, we're all thirsty and hungry, and I want to piss too." He spun around and pointed. "Henry's hung over, Greg had to come in on his daughter's birthday." He waved a hand at the rest of the cast. "They've all got problems with being here, but not one of them threw a fit of hysterics. Stop being such a fucking prima donna. All you had to do was ask. Dr Vale knows we're all dead on our feet, and she probably is too. She's a pro. She'll give us a break. You be a pro too."

He turned to Madelyn, who had stopped in her tracks. "Well, Dr Vale," he said. "Can we have a break for a few minutes?"

The whole theatre seemed to hold its breath. The silence lasted for a few seconds that seemed like an hour, then Madelyn said "Yeah, sure," and her voice was almost normal. "Take fifteen, and no more. Back here on stage in fifteen. We'll move the last act." Every person sighed with relief. As they moved off she said "And Redmond."

"Yes?"

“The name is Madelyn, Kevin; Madelyn.”

He nodded and went downstairs with the others, his arm around Claire’s shaking shoulders.

OoO

Ed grabbed a quick cup of coffee down in the bar and came back up to the stage to work with Mick on stringing the supports for the drops. Marco wanted blacks hung right around to give a half-round arena effect. There was enough of the fly tower left sound enough to hang the rails from fixed cables, but it meant climbing up and down ladders to put coach bolts into the remaining wooden superstructure.

Ed finished his coffee and was just about to go up a ladder when Brian Keyes, playing the Papal Ambassador in the last act, came up to him.

“Ed can I get my script? I’ll need it to write the new moves in.”

“Didn’t Barry give it to you?”

“He said it must still be in the safe.”

Ed unbuckled his work belt and led Brian up to the office, where he bent to the safe and opened it. There were letters, contracts and a few other documents, but no sign of the script. The box of scripts had been there before; he’d checked it after the fire to see if there was any damage. “Sorry,” Ed said, “Barry must have it after all. He puts them all in one of those file boxes. Get him to check it.”

Brian grunted acknowledgement and left. Ed locked the safe again and went back to rigging the cables.

The rehearsal was back under way and Ed managed to get some cable eyes set in position when he felt a movement on the ladder. He looked down to see Barry half-way up the ladder, gesturing wildly at him.

“Ed,” he whispered, “come down to the bar, right now. Do it quietly.”

Ed stared at him for a moment then said, “I could get down there more quickly if you got off the ladder.”

Barry scuttled down and stood waiting as Ed came down. Something must be up, thought Ed, because Barry’s dazzlingly bright cream shirt had dirt and dust on it, and what looked like a rust stain that would be a real bugger to get out. He held up a finger to his lips as Ed took off his tools, and Ed saw that the beautifully manicured nails were chipped and broken. What the hell had happened?

They walked down below the stage and came up through one of the pit doors to avoid disturbing the rehearsal. That was another problem, Ed thought. The musicians were going to have to work bloody hard to get ready for the show. They didn't have any yet, let alone the music for them to play. He shook his head. That was a problem for tomorrow.

Barry checked the bar to make sure it was empty, then turned and grabbed Ed's shoulders. He looked to be almost in tears. "Ed, Brian's script has gone missing."

Ed shifted Barry's hands and sat him down in one of the booths. "You're sure?"

"Yes! I've checked the script box, and the safe, I've even dragged the bloody safe away from the wall and looked behind it. I've searched everywhere in the office, and every step of the way from the office to the wings where I hand out the scripts. It's nowhere."

"Okay. Where did you last see it?"

"When Brian put it back in the file box on Friday. They're filed under character names, and his is right at the front: Alonzo."

"You're sure you didn't take it out and put it somewhere?"

"Of course I'm bloody sure," Barry whimpered. "The one thing I had to take care of without fail was the security of the scripts, and now I've stuffed that up."

"Maybe not," Ed said quietly.

"What?"

"The door to the office was open when we got back in here, and I know I locked it when we left on Friday. I thought someone else had opened it to check in there and not locked it again."

"So?"

"I think someone broke into the safe and took the script before they set the fire. The office is close to the flies; if the sprinklers hadn't worked so quickly it would have gone up as well."

"But why take Brian's script? It's only a small part, and he doesn't come in until act five."

"It's the first one in the box, right?"

Barry nodded.

"What's written on the file box?"

“The show’s name, *Henry VII* scripts.”

“If you didn’t know they were part scripts, and you were in a hurry, you might just grab the first one at hand, Brian’s, and shove the rest back in, lock the safe again and bugger off.”

“But, but,” Barry stammered, “they’d just have Brian’s lines and cues and the moves for the old set, because he writes them in the margins.”

“Yeah, well,” Ed said grimly, “I reckon we’d better get on to Mayne and let him know that someone out there is going to be word-perfect in one part, at least.”

OoO

Rain drummed distantly on the roof as the rehearsal went on after the break. One of the good things about these old theatres, Ed thought, was their high ceilings and solid construction. It kept the real world outside, where it was supposed to be, unless the real world broke in and set a fire.

Brian used a pad to write in his moves and no-one seemed to notice. Mayne was out of contact and not even his secretary knew where to find him. “So,” Marco said to Ed and Barry when they went to the bar to discuss it, “we’re bugged for the moment. ‘E’s going to need his script, isn’t he? Sometime?”

“I can photocopy another one for him from the prompt script,” Barry said.

“But they didn’t know anything about this theatre,” Marco stated. Barry and Ed looked over at him. “Look,” he said, “the bleedin’ theatre was set on fire, but they set it on the stage, not in the auditorium, which would’ve totally stuffed us, because they thought it was built like some modern gimcrack. They break into the place, crack the safe and grab the first script that comes to hand because they think they’re all the same. They knew about setting fires, but they didn’t know about the sprinklers, the fire curtain or how fast it would be put out. The fly tower’s bugged, but the rest of it’s useable, but they didn’t know that it would be.”

Ed nodded his head. They’d had the doors and windows open all day, and most of the smoke had been pushed out by the fans he’d hired, along with the smell of wet ash and burnt wood. The new stage seemed solid enough, and Marco swore he’d have the new set up by Thursday. Mick said nothing had been touched below the stage and Linda was airing and cleaning the costumes right now. They’d be ready by Tuesday.

Barry broke in to Ed’s thoughts. “Yes, yes; we’ll all be ready, but we have to pray that the bills don’t come in until we get some revenue. To get revenue we need bums on seats, and to get bums on seats we need advertising.”

“Jesus,” Ed said, “I would have thought the exposure we’ve got in the media, plus the fire, would have been enough advertising for any show.”

“No,” Barry shook his head, “it’s not.” He waved his hands, trying to show them the problem. “We’ve got a theatre that seats nearly three thousand people, and they’ll be paying a hundred dollars for the good seats, but there aren’t many of those, down to forty dollars for the cheap seats. If we fill every seat in the theatre we’ll make around two hundred and twenty thousand a night. Seven shows a week, that’s one and a half million a week.”

“Sounds bloody good to me,” Marco said.

“And we might be able to do that for a two week run. Then the houses will drop off. We’ve got a cast of twenty-five, including the understudies, plus the crew, the mechs, front of house, PR, and a few others who have to be paid, so we’ve got a wages bill of about two hundred grand a week. That doesn’t stop, and it doesn’t get smaller if there are only two people in the audience. There are utilities on top of that, and insurance, and interest on the loans taken out to buy the building. That’s another hundred grand a week. Then there are the other loans that Mayne had to take out from the Queensland mob. That’s another three hundred grand a week.” He looked at Marco and Ed. “You know the figures. Shows operate on a forty percent break even figure. If we ever drop below that we can’t pay the bills. But that’s not the worst part.”

“What is?” Ed asked.

“The mob loans had a fixed term. The principle has to be paid off six weeks after the show goes up. Otherwise they’ll foreclose, shut down the show, take the manuscripts and run. We need full houses for six weeks to make the pay-off.”

The other two pondered what Barry had said.

“But that shouldn’t be bleedin’ difficult,” Marco said, “even without publicity. It’s a brand new fuckin’ Shakespeare, for Christ’s sake. That should pull them in from all over.”

“If it was a brand new Lloyd-Webber musical with a million dollars worth of special effects, maybe we could. But it’s Shakespeare. Even if we played the West End or Broadway, it would be questionable whether it could compete with *Cats* or *Phantom*. Most people don’t know about Shakespeare, or don’t care,” Barry said bitterly. “It got some early press attention, but three days later it was yesterday’s news. We’re paying for ads, and the first ten days are sold out, but after that it drops right off. The fire will get some press attention, and the reviews had better be good, or people will go and pay twenty dollars for the latest Hollywood blockbuster, rather than pay eighty for a Shakespeare which most of them won’t understand. Once you get past the academics and the theatre

groupies, the Bard doesn't have a lot of appeal, particularly a play where you can't get a ready-made interpretation from notes or the latest Branagh movie. We need to keep the show in the public eye for as long as possible."

Ed had never heard Barry speak this way before. The effete flapping had disappeared and a passionate, pragmatic and very tired man had come in his place. It was as if a spotlight had been turned on and revealed the real Barry hidden in the shadows. But he was right. Ed knew how the business worked as well as anyone did. He knew the hard economic facts that lay beneath the glitz and the gloss of theatre, that there wasn't a theatre in the world that could survive on a steady stream of Shakespeare and the classics. Partly, he thought, it was their own bloody fault. If a theatre ticket only cost five bucks more than a cinema ticket, they'd pull in more punters. A lot more. But even then, cinema economics were different. The studios put up the money for films, not the cinemas, and if a film didn't pull audiences the cinema dropped it and put the next one on. They might run movies to small houses, but it cost them almost nothing to run the movie. It cost the same to run the play no matter how many people were in the audience.

Theatres survived on grants and government handouts, particularly in Australia. It shouldn't be that way, but it was. Even then, it was 'high art' that got a huge chunk of the money, for a three-week season that played to near empty houses after the first two weeks. They catered for a tiny minority of the public, most of whom attended the shows because it was the thing to do to look cultured, and they could be seen with other people who constituted the culturati. The little theatres were so tied up with experiments and post-modernist re-interpretations that they really needed the grants to survive at all, because the only people who went to the shows were friends of the cast. And then there were the blockbusters that were organized like military operations and were as warm and friendly as a ball-pein hammer. They drew in the crowds, though, and ran for years, until they became an institution like *The Mousetrap*, which, Ed thought should be re-named *The Tourist Trap*. London and New York, West-End and Broadway, although, in reality, there were huge shows that were off-Broadway and far from the West-End.

Ed liked the shows somewhere in between, where there was new and old, where they weren't priced out of the range of the average punter, weren't so elevated they couldn't see the ground any more or so commercial they were a movie on stage. He liked being in charge of the show as it ran, liked the responsibility and the intricacy of working on a show that would last a few months, then close and everyone went home happy.

"So how do we do that?" he asked.

"Yeah, well," Marco said. "First let's try to find out why someone's tried to nobble the show before it goes up."

Mayne didn't want to tell the police. Ed let him know what had happened when he came in after the rehearsal had finished. Barry ushered him up to the office while the actors changed and went back to the hotel. They were mostly too exhausted to go back to the bar, except for a few regulars.

"Whoever said there's no such thing as bad publicity was an idiot." Mayne was fiddling with a pen as he spoke. He hadn't looked happy when he walked in, and the news hadn't improved his mood. It was the first time Ed had seen him disgruntled. He threw down the pen. "There's something else going on. Adam got a call from his boss at the university. It was a heads-up that there's going to be a serious challenge to the authenticity of the play, the whole set of manuscripts, in fact."

"Is it that Oxford bloke?" Ed said.

"No. He's strictly lightweight. They pulled him in to that interview because he was available and to get a second opinion. The producer knew that Adam would blow him away. No," he spread his hands on the dark wood of the desk and sighed, "this time it is the head of the Freebury Institute, which has the second-biggest collection of Shakespeare in the world. Holden Deane, one of the most respected names in the field, backed up by a team of lesser but notable experts, has come out with a statement that this is all a publicity stunt, that the play's a fake or, at least, a 'hybrid text,' which is a kind way of saying that it's a mixture of bits and pieces old and modern, and that it was probably cooked up by some talented experts. He held back on saying it was an outright forgery."

Barry got up and walked around the room once, his hands twisting together nervously. "Oh, god; what's he basing this opinion on?"

"That the plays couldn't have been found where I found them. That there are more than thirty-seven plays. Finally, that there was no reason for Shakespeare to write *Henry VII*, and no record of it ever having been performed."

"But you've had the plays vetted by experts!"

"He doesn't accept their opinion. Calls them fourth-rate amateurs. He demands to see the manuscripts and assess them himself, and that's not going to happen. Not now."

"What do we do?" Ed asked.

"We keep the robbery quiet for now, and get Adam to argue the case that this isn't just a hoax."

Marco pushed himself erect in his chair and leaned forward. "Yeah, but why are they out to nobble this bleedin' show?"

"I don't know. But they must have been desperate to see what was in the script. We might have to get a little more security into this place."

"We can't afford it!" Barry shrieked. "We have to get some television ads, half the first house has to be comped and we can't use the cheap seats."

Ed thought for a second. "We might not be able to afford a security contract, but I reckon I can get Terry to rig up a few cameras around the joint. Shit, you can buy them in hardware shops."

Barry calmed down a little. "But on top of that," he said, "we have perhaps a three-week window of opportunity to have this show to ourselves before some local rep club has it on."

Ed shook his head. "Not without a script, they won't."

"Oh, and how long will it be before someone smuggles in a recorder, or just leaves their mobile 'phone on for the entire performance so that it can be recorded outside?"

"We can ban those from the theatre."

"What, do a body search? People will smuggle them in."

Mayne raised his hands to quiet Barry down. "That's a problem," he said, "but they'll have copies of the scripts in six weeks, anyway. The complete works will go on sale then. If we have the money to fund it."

It was always the way, Ed thought. Everything is running smooth as silk, and then something comes along to bugger it all up. The strange guy pretending he was a reporter, Barry's mugging, the fire, the theft, now the challenge to the authenticity of the script. It all had to be more than coincidence; if it wasn't the Sydney mob, it had to be somebody with a lot of connections. He unconsciously flexed his shoulders the way he used to back in the days when he went to dodgy pubs with other sailors, getting ready for a brawl. When they all went their ways, he caught up with Mayne and asked him if he could have a word somewhere quiet. They went up to the manager's office.

"Listen," Ed said as they sat down, "have you paid off the locals?"

"What?"

"The local petty crime boss who runs the shows. I don't know who it is now, but he'd want his slice."

"I thought the Gold Cost people would do that. I mean, it's their bailiwick, isn't it?"

"I think you'd better make a few calls to find out. We don't want any more trouble."

Mayne massaged his temples with his palms as he said, "Christ, this just doesn't bloody finish, does it?"

Ed got up and walked to the door. "Welcome to show biz," he said.

OoO

It had been a long, hard day, and Ed needed a drink before he headed back home. Linda had taken over in the bar because Terry was still clambering around checking lights and hanging cables for the jury-rigged sound system. She'd put away all the aired costumes and couldn't do any more until the rest came back from the cleaners. She picked up a schooner glass when she saw Ed and looked at him inquiringly. He nodded and went to sit down at the bar when Henry's hand waved to him from a back booth where he and Kevin sat. He went over and joined them.

"A long and difficult day," Henry said.

Ed nodded and closed his eyes for a moment.

It felt very good to relax against the leather of the seat. Tomorrow would be another long day, and he'd have to find some cheap cladding to hide the scaffolding of the new stage, and some paint for that, which would mean getting on the phone as soon as the shops were open, driving around to get the stuff, bringing it back and getting it up, probably with the aid of a couple of NIDA kids who Barry swore would be in place, ready and willing, at eight in the morning. They were cheap, and he hoped they could find their arses with both hands, because he didn't want to have to explain everything to them.

Linda brought his beer over and one for herself. She sat down and raised her glass to Kevin. "That was bloody gutsy, what you did today. I was shitting myself. I thought Maddy was going to rip Claire apart and chew on her bones until you stepped in, then I thought she'd take it out on you. Cheers."

"Cheers. It wasn't much. We're all tired, and Claire just needed someone to slap her around a bit. She came out of it pretty quick. She's just like that."

"Yes, indeed," Henry said. "Top C all the time is our little Claire." He sighed. "A fading prima donna, in very good company."

"Oh, come on, Henry; you're a star, Kevin's a big name, the whole cast have good reps."

Henry smiled at her. "It must be the gin, then, my dear, to make me so grim. But, alas," he took a sip of his drink, "I fear that it may not be totally the drink that drives me to be maudlin, but a hefty dose of

reality.” He leaned back and seemed to gaze into the dim light above the bar. “I have not actually distinguished myself in my last few productions. Indeed, the reviewers were unkind enough to suggest that I should get off the stage while the getting was good, before my already tarnished reputation dulled to invisibility, if I may beat that particular metaphor to death. This show was either to be my revival or my swan song, I hadn’t made up my mind yet.”

“Bullshit, Henry,” Kevin said, “you’re a legend.”

“Yes, dear, and like most legends, based on myth and fiction, with just a smidgeon of fact thrown in.”

“And Claire’s hardly fading. She’s gorgeous.”

“A tribute, if I may say so, to her dietician, personal trainer and, at least in some places, her plastic surgeon.”

Ed laughed and nearly spilled his beer. “Jesus, that was a bit catty, Henry.”

“But sadly accurate, for all its felinity. I knew the poor darling when she could work all evening, party all night and turn up fresh as a daisy for rehearsal in the morning. There was not a line on her face or a care in her heart, and she ate like a longshoreman and drink like Falstaff. But those days are past, and now she fears that all she has to rely on is her acting talent, which did not receive the attention it deserved while she was getting starring roles by tossing her tits around.”

“Oh, god; cheer up or I’ll cut off your booze,” Linda said.

“I don’t know about Claire and Henry,” Kevin said in a low voice, “but this show was a chance for me to prove I could act.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Kevin,” Linda said, “your face is splashed over cinemas all over the world. You’re famous.”

Kevin nodded. “Yep, famous. I’m twenty-seven, and I’ve been making movies since I was sixteen, when I was that jock with a golden heart in *Heartache High*. I still remember my big speech: ‘Y’know, Johnny, I can’t do stuff like you do. I’ve got muscles, and the chicks all like me, but, like, you know, you can do stuff. Y’know. You’re good people too.’” He took a drink. “I’ve made eighteen movies since that one, and I’ve never had a speech that was more complicated. Fuck,” he said bitterly, “I had the lead in one movie, *Banana Republic*, and a parrot had more lines than I did.” He looked up at them, and he looked tired and hurt. “You know what my agent said when I told him I wanted to do this? He asked me why, and I told him I wanted to show people I could act. He said ‘You don’t need to be able to act, you’re *Kevin Redmond*.’ He laughed at me like I’d just told him a really good joke.” He put his

glass down carefully and stared into it as if it contained arcane secrets. “I can be a leading man with all the brainless roles in the world until my looks start to fade, and then I’ll have nowhere to go.”

“And the saddest thing,” Henry broke in, “was that your ability had started to shine out. Indeed, you’ve coped with this whole change of set thing better than most of us.”

Kevin looked up. “Oh, that, that’s what happens in movies all the time. The director changes ideas, or the art director has a brainstorm, or something happens to the weather and you have to shoot at night or something. You get used to changes.”

“Maybe,” Ed said, “we’re not going to have any more changes. Touch wood.”

“Yes,” Linda said and knocked on the table. “That would be lovely.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Adam brought the car back on Monday morning, and his son came down with him. Tony was a bit over six feet tall, lean and tanned, with dark hair in a regulation military cut. They found Ed with the youngsters from NIDA, helping to shovel burnt wreckage out into a skip in the lane.

“This is a bit of a bloody mess,” Adam said as he tossed the keys to Ed.

“Yeah.” Ed took a break from sweeping for a while. “If I ever catch the bastard who did this there’ll be a few interesting minutes.” He looked over at Tony. “This is your son, is it?”

“Yeah. Tony, Ed Cahill.”

They shook hands and Ed said “Your dad said you work for the Defence Signals Directorate. What’s that all about?”

Tony laughed. “DSD. It’s all about electronic intelligence. I work at the low end, routine examination of open signals for codes and such. If I think I’ve found any I hand them on to the encryption experts. I’ll be out of it in a few months, move on to my next posting.”

“What’s that likely to be?”

Tony shrugged. “Not sure. I’ve applied for recon infantry, but that’s up to the blokes with all the pips on their collars.”

“Tony’s down early,” Adam put in, “to do some work with the computer lab at the Uni.”

“More about codes,” Tony said. “I start tomorrow.” He looked around. “You look like you could do with a hand here. Can I help?”

“If you know how to push a broom you can.” Ed passed his over and explained what had to be done. “And when you get this finished, find a tall skinny bloke with glasses called Terry and see if he needs a hand with the lights. And thanks.”

That said, Ed took Adam and led him up to the office. Madelyn was uncharacteristically quiet as she watched the act one rehearsal, but Ed could see, as they went up the stairs, that Linda was nodding her head and scribbling notes. They sat down and Ed brought Adam up to date with events.

“So you see,” he finished, “we’re broke, and about to be buggered if we can’t get the show on in time, and make it a hit. Then there’s this Holden Deane fellow.”

“Yeah, good old Holden.” Adam leaned back in his chair. “I should have known he’d take a bloody interest when he found out I was involved.”

“Why?”

“I upset him when I was a young snot at Oxford. I pointed out that a few pages in a first folio that he had authenticated couldn’t have actually come from any first folio, and that they’d probably come from remaindered copies of the second. He must’ve been pissed when he did it, because the differences stood out like dog’s balls when you looked for them. I don’t think he’s ever forgiven me.”

“Well, he’s a bloody big name now, and he’s telling people that the play’s a forgery and that he wants to see the original texts to validate them.”

“Is Mayne going to co-operate?”

“I don’t think so, but he’s got enough problems without this.”

There was a knock at the door. Linda came in and said “You know that bloke pretending to be a reporter? He’s back. He collared one of the NIDA kids as she was taking some crap out to the bin and asked her what was happening in the theatre, whether the show was going to go on or not.”

“Bloody hell!” Ed snarled and bunched his fists, “I’ve had enough of this. Let’s go down and find out what this bloke really wants.”

“He’s gone, but Bec’s a clever little thing; she got a shot of him with her mobile ‘phone.”

“Right. Let’s have a look at him.”

Bec was in black jeans and a *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* t-shirt today, looking about sixteen. She held up her ‘phone and said, “I pretended it was on silent and I had a call while he was talking to me. I pressed the video button and just kept shooting while I talked into it. I walked around a bit and he eventually got sus and took off. Have you got a laptop anywhere?”

Terry had his, and he also had an assortment of cables, one of which fitted the ‘phone. They stood around under the stage while Bec transferred the video from her phone to the computer. When they played it most of the footage was jerky, but a couple of shots were quite clear. Terry captured them as stills and put them up on the screen. He was wearing a leather bomber jacket this time, with a thin black tie over a blue check shirt.

“All right,” Ed said, “anybody know this bastard?”

Tony had been helping Mick put together the frame for a flat. He strolled over, took a look and said “I can find out, if you give me a few minutes.”

“What?” Ed snapped his head around to look at him.

“Pass me the phone.” He took it and dialled a number that he didn’t let them see. “G’day, McGee,” he said into it. “Listen, I’m going to send you some video of a bloke. Can you run it through the facial ID databank? Yeah, no need to mention this to the boss. Ta, mate. Call me back on my phone. Cheers.” He pressed a few more buttons and handed the phone back.

“He’s a mate in the Federal cops,” he said. “If the bloke in this has got a passport or came into the country on one, McGee will find him quick smart. Where can I find a broom?”

True to his words, after about ten minutes Tony’s phone rang and he stopped sweeping to take the call. A few grunted responses followed by an “Ah, shit; I know that bastard. Thanks mate. I owe you a beer.” He turned to them. “He’s put on a bit of weight and changed his hair colour, but I thought there was something familiar about him.”

“You know him?” Ed said, leaning on his broom.

“Yeah. Met him when I was over in the UK doing a course at GCHQ. He was doing the same one.” He gazed at them quizzically. “What have you done to upset MI6?”

OoO

Ed rolled over, trying to get comfortable and quiet his boiling brain. The rehearsal had gone well enough to get an approving grunt from Madelyn, and the stage had held together, but it was all being done too fast. Mick was an old pro, and Marco was a bloody genius, the kids from NIDA were better than he’d expected, but it was a mess. He had to find ways to get the whole thing up and operating in nine days. The tech run was called for noon on the day of the dress, but there were so many things that could go wrong with it. That’s why you held them the day before the dress, so that nobody was hanging from the ceiling changing lights while the audience shuffled in. Now the bloody MI6! Tony was sure it was the same man he’d seen in England, even though he couldn’t remember his name. He thought it might be Charles, or Chuck, but he wasn’t sure. He said he’d make a few calls and try to find out. Mayne hadn’t been in all day, and Tony had no idea why a British agency would be involved. It was just another mystery, like where Terry had got the new sound console and intercom. When Ed has asked him he’d just put a finger to his lips and said it was on loan. There was also the question of the bolts of canvas and a dozen legs that had arrived without any paperwork. Barry had goggled at them, but Marco had just laughed and said that it must be their lucky day.

Ed didn’t like being involved with shonky deals, especially ones that involved organized crime. But that relationship had been around even in Shakespeare’s day; crime, politics and theatre, all blended together. The theatre always needed money, most people had more brains than to invest in it, and that’s where the moneylenders came in, and where the moneylenders came in there the door was left open to Al Capone and his descendants. A lot of productions hovered on the edge of a catastrophe

curve, owing money in all directions, almost making a profit, almost moving to bigger venues, companies tottering along on a very thin tightrope. These new Shakespeare plays would be a godsend to them, Ed thought: no rights to pay for, instant interest, productions all over the place, amateurs and professionals alike poncing through the new *Hamlet*. The RSC must be licking its lips and scribbling applications for funding at this very moment.

He'd worked there once, at the Stratford theatre for a production of *The Tempest*. Some big names, and very professional, almost industrially thorough. A great show, but no surprises, no little moments of shock when someone turned a phrase on its head and revealed a new insight, no chill at the back of the neck as a word turned the world to magic. Engrossing, as perfect and glossy as a china mask, but sometimes after a show he'd wander a few hundred metres down to the Church of the Holy Trinity where Shakespeare was buried, and wondered what the man would have thought of it all, of the Shakespeare industry that had grown up around what he'd written. Particularly what he'd think of the millions of words written to interpret, criticize, transform, re-interpret the plays. Ed would lean against the back fence of the church in the dark and look out on the mist over the Avon and the sleeping swans, ghostly in the dimness, and that's when he knew he was doing it right, that theatre was where he wanted to be, with all its idiosyncrasies, its poor pay and uncertainty; breathing life into fantasies. He wondered if Will had thought the same thing, or whether his head had been in Greece, or Rome, or the Forest of Arden. Maybe people like Shakespeare just knew, without thinking about it.

Linda rolled over to him and said "Aren't you ever going to go to sleep?"

He turned to her. "Are you?"

"I hope to, if I can stop worrying about the bloody costumes turning up on time tomorrow." She raised herself up and checked the time on the bedside clock. "Today, I mean." She flopped onto her back. "Christ! It's half-past-two, and we're called for eight. The costumes are coming at eight-thirty, and I'll have to check how many buttons and clasps have been lost, whether any seams have split and fix those before I get them into the dressing rooms." She sighed "Why did I ever let me seduce me away from the chicken farm with your honeyed lies?"

Ed chuckled. "Your dad was a Newcastle bus driver and he and your mum retired to Noosa five years ago. Your only experience of chicken has been when it's covered in eleven secret herbs and spices."

"It was a metaphor, you barbarian."

He rolled to face her. The traces of light from the window and the green glow from the clock lit her as she lay on the pillow, made her look ethereal, put faded emerald witchlights on her pale silk nightie. Her hair was tangled beneath her in a glorious mess.

“Linda,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“Let’s get married after this show.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Settle down, home and garden, dog digging up the roses, that sort of thing?”

“We can call the dog Bill.”

“Kids?”

“If we can.”

She turned to face him, and her face was serious. “Say goodbye to Hollywood? Give up show biz?”

“Change, at least. There’s enough local work to keep us going for a long time. We wouldn’t have to wander around the world chasing shows. We’ve both got good reputations in the business; we’ll never be short of work.”

She made a moue. “That’s if this show is any good. You’re only as good as your last show, baby. That’s what they say.”

He kissed her gently. “Yeah, they do. So, let’s make sure the show’s a sell-out and then get married.”

“So getting married is conditional on the show being a hit, is it?”

“Nah. We’ve talked about settling down, getting married, before, but never done it, for one reason or another. But it’s the right time now, I think. Hit or flop, I’ve loved you ever since we met, and I want you to marry me.”

Linda started to cry. “You utter bastard,” she sniveled. “You spring this on me when I haven’t had any sleep, I’m uptight about the costumes and we’re in the middle of fixing a show that’s broke. Worst of all, I’m stone cold sober. You could at least give a girl a drink before you pull a stunt like this.”

She rolled out of bed, stumbled across to the mini-bar and grabbed some bottles and a couple of glasses, poured drinks and brought them back to the bed. She thrust one at Ed as he sat up.

“Here. Don’t say anything. Just drink it.”

They clinked glasses and downed the drinks. The scotch burned the back of Ed's throat and he put his glass on the bedside table. Linda followed suit.

She straddled his legs and leaned forward to kiss him gently on the lips. "Yes," she said, "I'll marry you, even though you could have brought this up at a more convenient time. At least it will stop Dad and Mum from giving me Looks whenever I visit them. They'll be relieved you're finally making an honest woman out of me."

"Yeah. My mum will be glad there's finally some evidence all this theatre business hasn't turned me into a poofteer."

Linda wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands, reached down and pulled her nightie off over her head, then leaned forward and kissed him again. "Well," she said, "do you like girls?"

OoO

Ed found it hard to believe the apparition that stood in front of him. "Why did you say you were here?" he said.

The apparition wore gaiters over a pair of plus four tweeds. Ed hadn't thought you could even buy those any more. They must have been handed down through the family, father to son, over the generations. A Donegal tweed jacket was over what looked much like a heather-mix shirt, and the ruddy, smiling face was topped by a houndstooth check fedora. Ed stared at the tie. "Are you really a member of the MCC?"

"Sorry, I am." His voice was broadly Australian and apologetic, as if he'd committed some cardinal sin. "My dad was a member, and he got me a membership for my twenty-first birthday. I've only been there once."

He didn't seem to be too many years beyond twenty-one now, Ed thought. "And you're here about the music?"

He nodded vigorously. "I heard that you wanted some people who could play Elizabethan music. I've got a group that does it."

"Does what?"

"Plays Elizabethan music. Hautboy and the Lounge Lizards."

"Do you play gay clubs or something?"

"Mostly weddings. You know. SCA weddings."

“SCA? As in Sca music?”

“No, as in Society for Creative Anachronism. They dress up and hit each other with wooden swords.”

The penny dropped. “Those costumed nuts.”

He beamed. “Those are the ones. We’re getting more work from WOW every week, as well.”

Ed felt some sort of dark pit opening in front of him, but he had to ask. “Is that some sort of charitable organization?”

“It’s a game,” Terry chimed in from where he was laying cable. “An on-line game where they dress up in costume on computer and hit each other with electronic swords, go raiding, pretend they’re elves and stuff.”

“And they get married. They hire us to play medieval music at their weddings, when they dress up as their characters, but we just play Elizabethan music. They can never tell the difference.”

Ed had been around a bit but he now realized there were worlds far beyond his ken. In an attempt to get the conversation back on the rails he said “And you’ve come to audition for the orchestra.”

“No, we are the orchestra. Mr MacGuire contacted me yesterday evening and asked me if we were free, then told me to turn up with the crew this morning so we could start rehearsing with the director and the cast and work out what we’d play.”

“Jesus!”

“I’m Arthur, by the way, Arthur Bassing.” He stuck out his hand and Ed shook it.

“What do you play, Arthur?”

“Crumhorn.”

Ed gave up at this point. He expected Madelyn and the cast at any minute, he had to start hanging the legs and Marco had worked all night on the flats so that they could be set in position today. He was having a snooze in the bar before he got back to work painting the drapes. And Ed still had to work out a way for the actors to get changed on stage. “Terry,” he called. “Can you take Arthur and show him the pit? Find out how much area he’ll need to set up when the rest of the group gets here.”

Bec and the other NIDA people were already taking weights from the unusable fly ropes to steady the flats as he walked back to the cyclorama. Marco’s plan was pretty simple. There were effectively five main settings in the play. There were others, but they could be suggested by just lighting one area and leaving the rest dark. Originally, the settings would have been created by raising and lowering the

flats on tab bars, but that couldn't be done now, so Marco had designed one set for the most used setting, the throne room, and the rest could be created through raising and lowering soft drapes and through changing the lighting so that scrim in front of the flats were lit instead of the flats themselves. He'd also worked out a cunning way to use shadows to create a forest. He was, Ed had to admit, a bloody genius.

Ed checked the numbers written on the sides to see that the flats were stacked against the wall in the right order. It was a pain in the arse to have to shuffle them as you set them up. He gave a nod to two of the NIDA students who were helping, and they started to take the first flat to its position.

"Stop!" he yelled. He walked over to them. "Don't grab the flats by the sides and put your fingers on the front. The paint might still be damp, for a starter, and if you grab it too hard you can dent the canvas or even put a finger through it. Take them by the crossbars at the back."

"Sorry, Ed," the taller of the two said shamefacedly. "We just didn't want them to fall."

"If they start to fall and you can't control it just let them go. They'll fall softly and you might damage them by pulling too hard at the timbers. These tall flats are pretty fragile."

"Okay, Ed."

They had the first half-dozen flats set up and weighted down when Madelyn showed up. She nodded at Ed and asked him how long until the set was up. He figured it would be about another hour and a half to get the rest of the flats up, weighted down and tied together.

"Okay," she said. "I'll get them checking costumes and run through notes until then. I'll spread them out in the auditorium to check sightlines as we do the rehearsals."

"You might want to go down and talk to Arthur, the crumhorn player, about music."

"Who the fuck is he?" she demanded.

Ed raised his hands placatingly. "Barry found him and his group playing a wedding or something. I don't know the full story, but he's with Terry and he'll explain it all."

She checked her watch. "He'd better do it quickly. The cast is due here in fifteen minutes." She stalked off towards the pit.

OoO

Mayne looked disturbed. In fact, he looked as if he was ready to kill someone. He stalked up and down the manager's office like a wolverine on a leash as he waited for Barry and Madelyn to get there. When they arrived, he glared at them as if it was all their fault.

"They've called in the fucking mortgage!" he announced. "The bastards have given me twenty-four hours to pay off the loan."

"Who?" Barry asked.

"The fucking bank, that's who."

Ed and Barry exchanged a glance. Barry hesitated for a moment, and then said "Have you done anything that might possibly have broken the law? Anything that might have made them think you were a bad risk?"

Mayne whirled to him. "No! They'll find everything open and above board, when they're finished looking at the accounts. Meanwhile, I have to find twelve million fucking dollars by noon tomorrow."

"Can we make a part payment," Ed said. "Anything that gives us some time to rustle up the cash."

"No, I've already called them and tried that. I couldn't even get in touch with the manager. They told me he was at a business meeting." He kicked the desk. "This is someone I directed hundreds of millions of dollars worth of business to when I was on top. I used to have dinner at his place every couple of weeks. We played fucking *golf* at the same club. Now he won't answer my calls."

Ed said "Why would they do this?"

Mayne stared at him. "Because they've been got at by someone."

"Maybe it's that guy who's been hanging around posing as a reporter, the one Tony found out was from the British Secret Service," Ed said..

Mayne hung his head. "Ah, shit, I'd forgotten about him," he said. He looked back up at them. "Now I've got those bastards on my back. They, *they*, could put pressure on a bank."

"But why would they?"

Madelyn sat up suddenly. "Could it be that money that you borrowed off the mob?"

"No, for Christ's sake. That was all the Gold Coast people, plus their overseas contacts. If any cops were interested in them, it would be the FBI or Interpol." He snapped his fingers. "It might be something to do with the provenance."

“Why,” Madelyn said.

“Well, the problems started pretty much as soon as I found the bloody thing. I’d bought and paid for it clearly and legally, but it was found in Cuban waters.” He raised his hands in a gesture of frustration. “The question of ownership came up straight away, as soon as I went to Ando Umako to get it assessed. He asked me how I got it, wouldn’t even consider examining it until I demonstrated some sort of provenance. When I told him the story, he wised me up to the legal situation. It was a precious text that, as far as I could work out from my investigations at the time, had been found in Cuban waters, lost from a Spanish ship in the seventeenth century, which had taken it from a Dutch ship as spoils of war. It’s a British document that belonged to the Wriothesley family, and it would be considered to be a valuable document, part of British Heritage, and so forth. I’d found it, or rather the father of the fishermen I bought it off had found it, back before Castro. I had to establish some sort of title apart from possession, so I sought legal permission from the Cuban government for possession of the chest that I’d bought at auction. That was a matter of record, and so I got an export licence for the whole thing, manuscript included. That cost a fortune in bribes to the relevant people in the Cuban government.”

“We need to talk to the MI6 guy,” Ed said.

Mayne gave a stifled laugh. “Yes, that would look very good to my business associates. I can’t pay the mortgage and then I go off and chat to the cops.”

Ed thought for a moment. “Maybe we can do it unofficially.” He fumbled out his wallet and searched through it. “I thought I still had this,” he said. It was a grubby card with a Sydney Morning Herald logo and a mobile number on it. “I’ll give the bastard a call and we can have a little talk.”

OoO

Ed arranged the meeting for that night, at a pub he knew not far from the theatre. The rest of the day was spent in thinking up what could be said and what could be asked. Madelyn had to get back to the rehearsal, but she wanted to be in on the meeting. Ed asked Tony if he could come, and he said that he’d love to get reacquainted with Charlie.

“He wasn’t too much of a prick, for a Pom,” he said.

The Cooper’s Arms was one of those pubs that looked pretty much the same as it had in the nineteenth century. Tiled on the outside, sticky carpet on the inside, its only concession to modernisation was knocking down a wall that had once divided the front and back bars. The old Tooheys signs were missing, but the clientele had pretty much stayed the same. Battlers in the

afternoon, youngsters in the evening. Not the university crowd, but more the mid twenties people who'd picked up an overpriced Victorian terrace down in Hordern St or across the road in Buckland Lane. They'd discovered the virtues of an old pub that wasn't tarted up, but just served beer and had a few pool tables. There was a band on Fridays and Saturdays, but most nights were quiet.

Backpackers stayed upstairs in the old rooms, and they lent an international atmosphere. The battlers just drank their beer and talked quietly, as resistant to change as the railway yards in Redfern where some of them worked. It was quintessential Australiana, and the MI6 agent stuck out like a pickle on a stick in his check jacket and polyester trousers.

He was at a table in a corner, and Ed slid into a seat opposite and nodded to him. "Bernie," he said.

Bernie nodded back. "And you're Ed Cahill, the stage manager."

"Did you know that when you talked to me the first time?"

"No, but I made a few inquiries."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a journo, it's my job to stick my nose into things."

They were in a quiet corner, and Bernie had his back to the wall, keeping a careful eye on the comings and goings in the pub, but he still started a little when Tony turned around from where he'd been sitting with his back to them at a table further up.

"Yeah, that'd be right," he said. He stuck out his hand. "G'day Charlie."

"Shit." He hesitated a moment and then took the hand. "And it's Charles."

"Yeah, knew it was one of the two."

"How'd you make me?" Charles, nee Bernie's, mid-Pacific accent had broadened to something closer to a London twang.

"Pure luck, mate. Good for us and bad for you. The girl you approached yesterday took a picture on her mobile, and I saw it."

"Shit," Charles said again. "So what happens now?"

Ed said "We'd like to find out what the fuck is going on."

"I can't tell you."

“Aw, mate,” Tony drawled, “you’re not on a job that’s registered with the locals. I asked around a bit and no-one knows anything. You’re here for the Service, but you, and they, have put a big hole in protocol. There’d be letters going backwards and forwards from diplomats if I was to blow the whistle on you.”

Charles drummed his fingers on the table, making up his mind. “There’s a limit to what I can tell you.”

“Yeah, well let’s tell your story to everyone that’s concerned,” Ed said, and pulled out his mobile. He dialled and spoke for a few seconds. “We’re not the only players in this.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mayne and Madelyn had been around the corner, waiting in a laneway. They joined Ed at the table within a minute. There was the usual low hubbub of a bar, the clink of glasses and muted conversation, a jukebox playing Lee Kernigan around the corner in the front bar, a rumble of passing traffic from King Street outside, beyond the barrier of the doors.

“If anyone would like a drink,” Mayne said, “then they’d better have some money on them because, courtesy of the Secret Service, I’m broke.” He stared across at Charles. “Now, why is that?”

“I’ll buy,” Charles said. “I’m on an expense account.”

He took orders and went to the bar, coming back with four beers and a vodka and tonic for Madelyn. They were all quiet, waiting for Charles to reply to Mayne’s question. Eventually he said “Okay. We leaned on the bank. There were instructions from on high.”

“How fucking high?” Madelyn asked.

“Higher than my pay grade, for a start.” He spread his hands. “Look, mine was just a watching brief. We wanted to find out what was going on. In fact,” he took a drink, “my job was pretty much redundant after the publicity started.”

“Then,” Ed said quietly, “it’s a news story tomorrow about how the Poms tried to burn down a theatre and stole a script for the show. Ineptly, as it so happens.”

Charles laughed. “You think if the Secret Service wanted that theatre burnt down that it would be done in such a cack-handed way? That wasn’t us, mate.” He chuckled again. “No, I’m afraid you’ve found yourself in the middle of a very bad situation.”

Mayne’s patience finally broke. “A bad situation?” he shouted. “We’ve got a show with no theatre as of tomorrow. Your parent institution has leaned on the bank so that it’s calling in the mortgage. I need money right fucking now. Seven million dollars and change by noon tomorrow.” His hand trembled as he took a drink, spilling a little beer from his glass as he put it back down. “So,” he said quietly, “what can I do?”

Charles looked at him meditatively. “Okay,” he said finally. “I think there are a couple of things you should know about your bank. Who do you think controls it?”

“Shareholders and a board of directors.”

Charles shook his head slowly. “You need to think a little more laterally, think bigger.”

Ed butted in. "Bigger than the bank? It's a multinational, isn't it?"

Charles smiled and nodded.

"Where's its head office," Ed directed this to Mayne.

"I'm not sure."

Charles said "Why did you pick that bank?"

"It's an old, established institution, rock solid, and I've always banked with them."

"Uh-huh. Now, where would one of the oldest commercial banks in the world have its headquarters?"

"Switzerland?"

"Guess again."

Mayne thought for a moment. "London?"

"Very good."

"And what does that mean?"

"Ah, there I have to stop giving you hints."

"I might be able to take you a little further," Tony said. "One of the things about the British banking system is that a lot of old money is invested in it. The older the bank, the older the money. Old money wields a lot of power and influence. So does the old-boy system. If someone highly placed, who wielded a lot of influence and had a large chunk of shares in the bank made a small request at the club, it just might trickle down to Sydney and put pressure on the manager of your bank to call in the loan."

"The fucking British class system!" Madelyn hissed. "Which one of the chinless wonders would have reason to shut us down?"

"Sorry, I can't comment," Charles said.

"Yeah, well," Ed said. "What's the play all about? Who would it make look bad? You point and I'll whistle."

"The royals? The events in the play happened more than five hundred years ago," Madelyn said. "How could that stir them up?"

"Charlie's not a popular person," Tony said. "Not over here, at least, even with royalists."

“There’s even a movement for Britain to become a republic,” Charles kicked in. “I can tell you that because it’s common knowledge.”

“So,” Madelyn said, “because the play shows a distant relative centuries ago as a lying weasel and murderer and that the line descended from him might actually be from his bastard son, that’s enough to make Australia, and maybe Britain, become republics.” She drained her drink. “Come on. It would make a good story in one of those conspiracy theory novels, but it won’t play in the real world.”

Charles just sat there and said nothing

“Did your masters set the fucking fire?” Madelyn said.

“Oh, no; that was the locals.” He looked around at their expressions. “Did you really think the Sydney mobs would take kindly to the Gold Coast mob muscling in on their territory? The word on the street is that the fire was courtesy of a local gang headed by Little Jimmy McHenry, a weasel who has fingers in quite a lot of pies, including the entertainment industry. He doesn’t want his patch taken away from him, particularly by a lot of greasy wogs who don’t even play soccer, which is his other passion.”

“McHenry?” Mayne spat. “That little weasel phoned me about transport arrangements for the play while I was in Japan. Left a message on my voicemail asking me to get back to him. I ignored it. I thought he was just another tout.”

Ed said, gently, “That was what I asked you about before. That was Jimmy asking for his cut.”

“All he talked about was transport payments, for Christ’s sake; I didn’t know he was talking about protection money.”

Charles sipped his drink. “That could have been a mistake,” he said. “Jimmy thinks he’s a big man on this campus, and he’s head of a local mob with concerns in theatre and entertainment.”

Mayne clenched a fist and pounded the table gently. “Christ,” he said, “I didn’t know. I’ve never produced a fucking play before.”

“He’s got an ego the size of Ayer’s Rock, and he doesn’t take kindly to being ignored,” Ed said. “He was around the last time I was here, eight years ago, but not as big a deal. He must have slimed his way to the top.”

“Why would they take a copy of the play,” Mayne asked.

“Ah, they didn’t. I did. Ineptly, as you pointed out, and it’s fairly useless to me. I took advantage of the confusion to slip up to the office, get into the safe and grab the first thing I could lay my hands on.”

He looked at them speculatively. "Incidentally, you might want to thank me for calling the fire department after I first saw the smoke."

"Thank you!" Madelyn said. "Why didn't you stop them?"

"I didn't know what was happening until two unsavoury characters came out and I saw the smoke. I didn't get inside until the fire was out. I flashed my other badge at a couple of firemen and went up to the office."

"Well, you can just give the damned script back."

"Gladly, but I hope you're not under the illusion that it hasn't been photocopied and analysed by now, including the cryptic marks scribbled in the margins."

Madelyn started to say "They're . . ." but Ed interrupted her before she could go on to tell him they were stage directions.

"So," he broke in, "the production is caught in a crossfire between two gangs, one of which wants to destroy it because protection money wasn't paid and to stop the other one getting a foothold down here."

"That's about it. Little Jimmy's a paranoid little prick," Charles said.

"Shit!" Mayne said. "He's mad. The Gold Coast Mob are financing this one show, because that was where I could get the money. They don't have any bloody designs on his patch."

"Yes, well," Charles said, "you'd have to convince McHenry of that."

Mayne had recovered by now. "Okay, so what can we do about that, for a starter? Can you and your bosses do something about Little Jimmy McHenry?"

"That's a local affair. Nothing to do with us." Charles checked his watch. "I have to go. Nice to meet you again, Tony."

"Likewise. Keep in touch."

"What about the mortgage? What can you do about that?"

"Sorry. As I said, that's something that's way above my pay grade."

Charles sauntered away through the doors up to Chapel Lane, and was gone.

It was raining and cabs were either absent or occupied, so they took the train to Central and walked down towards Darling Harbour. Even though it had been tarted up for the Olympics, the gloss was wearing off the area. The old working-man's pubs might have changed their names and now serve chocolate martinis and fake tapas at inflated prices, but they still had drunks lurching out of them to catch the last train home on the Illawarra line, the Parramatta line and points west. Some of the drunks wore Armani suits and Rockports, or Sass and Bide with Jimmy Choo, heading off for a doze all the way to the Blue Mountains, iPods plugged in to isolate them from the world but they were all of them, Armani or Pelaco, the spiritual descendants of the lonely losers that haunted the area. Surry Hills might be a classy address now, and expensive hotels might lurk on the fringes of Paddy's Markets, but the reek of poverty and hard times would never fade away to nothing.

Despite the rampant tourist traffic through Dixon Street, there were a couple of places that hadn't surrendered to the demands for tourist dishes, with rice. They'd arranged to meet Barry, Terry, Adam and Marco at one of them, the Xibao, a place that had a chequered past, and had once been favoured by the Sydney Push of the fifties and sixties, rebellious intellectuals, many of them from Sydney University, just up Broadway. It was still a restaurant of plastic tablecloths and paper serviettes, where you could get real Chinese pickled vegetables and a few dishes that weren't listed on the menu. Barry was deep in conversation with one of the waiters as they walked in. He looked up and broke off his conversation when he saw the grimness of their faces.

"I assume the news isn't good," he said as he bowed the waiter away.

"You could say that," Madelyn said as she sat down. "Totally fucked would be another way of putting it."

"Did you find out about this MI6 chap?"

"Oh, yes," Mayne said, and filled him in on the conversation with Charles. "So that's it," he concluded. "The only money I have is nowhere near enough to pay off the mortgage. The fact that a local criminal tried to burn down the theatre because I borrowed money from the wrong people is the least of my worries."

They were all quiet, chewing on their various thoughts. The restaurant bustled around them, with white-aproned waiters carrying plates and bowls around in a clattering dance where it seemed they were doomed to collide in a cacophony of broken china, but they somehow seemed to avoid each other, the tables and the customers. It was as spontaneous as flamenco, but with dinner plates.

"I've ordered the nine bowl special," Barry said brightly. "That should be enough to take our mind off our worries for a couple of hours."

"Yeah," Marco said bitterly, "but who's fuckin' paying? It sounds like the show's gone arse-up."

"I should have enough for a last supper," Mayne said. "And I'm sorry about the show." He looked around. "Everyone. I'm really sorry." His head dropped and his voice was a little husky. "It could have been so good."

"Well, it's not over yet," Ed broke in.

Mayne looked down at his hands as if he'd just seen a judge don the black cap. "In the morning I have to pull the cast and crew together and tell them the show's finished," he said. "I don't have the money to pay the mortgage. It wouldn't be fair to the cast and crew, to anyone, to pretend that we can go on. I can't get the theatre back."

"How the fuck did you ever make money?" Madelyn demanded. "You give up too easy."

Mayne raised his head and glared at her. "I made money because it's easy to make money when times are good. When times aren't good you have to have an edge, and all my edges are worn away, and I'm worn out with juggling finances, people and commitments. I don't want to give up. I want the show to go on as much as you do, but I just *cannot get the money*."

"Find a way!" Madelyn yelled. "Jesus Christ! We're working for nothing but promises, anyhow. The show goes up, or all the sweat, all the pain, has been wasted. I have not come all this way, worked my arse off and worked everybody else into the ground for some wimp to cave in when it's almost ready. Grow some fucking balls and find a way."

All noise in the restaurant had stopped, and both customers and waiters were looking at them. Madelyn looked right back at them, as if challenging them to say anything. Gradually, conversation resumed and the waiters started moving again, although people still cast sidelong glances at their table.

"Okay," Ed said softly, "let's find a way. There might be a way we can delay, there might be ways we can find the money. We need to make a list, we need to be methodical and to sort this out."

"Instead of being screaming queens about it?" Barry said under sotto voce.

"Something like that. If we think we're beaten, we're beaten." He raised his voice a little. "Maddy, will the cast be on side if we tell them what's happening tomorrow?"

“Hell, yes. I’ve beaten them and bullied them so hard that they’d stagger up from their deathbeds to get on stage.”

“Okay. We get in early and make some plans. What’s the exact amount we need?”

“The demand came through for twelve million, one hundred and two thousand eight hundred and eight dollars, and thirty-six cents.”

“So we need that tomorrow, by close of business.”

“They want it by noon, but I can argue with them to make it close of business. That’s standard, and I didn’t get the official letter until after they’d emailed me to let me know.”

Marco said “If we just had a couple of weeks we could probably rustle up the money from other backers. I know a few people in England who’d be interested. They wouldn’t come on board at such short notice, though.”

“Same here,” Madelyn said. “There are people I know in New York who’d drool at the chance to get involved.”

“And what do we do about Little Jimmy McHenry?” Barry asked.

“We can let the police take care of him,” Ed said. “I’ll have a word with a couple of cops I know.”

“That would be a good idea,” Mayne said. “Do it before the Gold Coast people find out.”

“Why?”

“These are not people who take failure well, nor do they like competition. They’re just as likely to send a couple of goons down here to start a shooting war with the locals.”

A series of waiters descended on them bearing fragrant bowls. Small pieces of meat and fish bobbed in broth, mysterious parcels gave out spicy scents and glistening sauces loaned the entire assemblage an appropriately theatrical appearance.

“Oh goody,” Barry clapped his hands and said. “So while we’re plotting to beg money from anywhere we can to save a production that’s under threat by local crooks, we can eat a hearty meal.”

“Yeah,” Madelyn said. “It’s a tradition, although usually it’s breakfast.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The whole cast were called for ten, and the whole crew were called up into the auditorium with them. Twenty-five cast, nearly that many crew, sat in the first few rows, looking mystified. Some had an expression that wondered what had gone wrong now, others just looked grim. Most simply looked confused. All those who were in the know were up on stage in a row of seats. Eventually, Barry got up cleared his throat, and walked to downstage centre.

“We’ve called you here,” he said in a voice that was more than a little strained, “because there have been further developments that affect the production.” There was a bubble of sound that quickly subsided. Barry gave a nervous smile and took a deep breath. “They say that the show must go on but, unfortunately, that’s no longer possible. We will not be opening. Mr Mayne will explain to you why this is so.”

Barry hastily sat down and Mayne took his place. He waited until the noise had died down to speak. Unlike Barry, his voice was firm, the voice of someone delivering bad news, but someone who had already come to terms with it.

“First,” he said, “let me assure you that no-one will be out of pocket because of this. You’ll be paid to the end of the week, and you’ll receive two weeks’ severance pay as well.” He looked out over them. “There is no one who regrets this situation more than I do. I know how hard you’ve worked, I know how much you’ve put into this, how much heart and soul and sheer sweat. I know how much some of you have counted on this performance. I cannot thank you enough for what you’ve done. We would all have been part of history, the first new Shakespeare play to open in more than five hundred years. That’s not to be.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a letter. “I received this by courier yesterday, but I’d already been contacted about it by telephone and email. It’s from the bank that holds the mortgage on this theatre. In part it says ‘In accordance with clause 51, subsection c, we are exercising our right to call for the payment of the full amount of the mortgage in twenty-four hours.’” He raised his head again. “That’s a clause that’s written into every mortgage contract, but it’s rarely exercised, and I’ve only ever heard of it being exercised if the payments are severely in arrears. Our payments are not in arrears. The option is being exercised for some other reasons, and while I may be able to speculate on those, I do not know what they are with any certainty.”

He carefully folded the letter and put it back in his pocket. “The long and the short of it is that I have to make a payment for the full amount of the mortgage by close of business today. Initially, the bank wanted the payment by noon, but I managed to persuade them, this morning, that it might be seen as actionable if they did not extend the time to close of business. Five this evening.” He gave a sigh that

sounded like a deflation. “I have pursued every avenue open to me, called on every friend I have.” He shook his head ruefully. “It appears I have far fewer friends than I thought, and some of those have been in meetings all day.” His shoulders slumped and his head hung down. “I am so, so sorry to have brought you this far, and not be able to take you all the way. We were within days of opening.” He raised his head. “Tomorrow, the receivers will be in charge of this theatre, and will close it down while they go through all my books and work out what they can sell to get the money owed on the loan. I intend that they get as little of the bar stock as possible. It will be a wake, but the bar is open, and the drinks are on me.” He turned and walked away from the stunned silence.

Then a lone voice spoke up.

“Hey, uh, Mr Mayne,” Kevin Redmond said.

Mayne turned and walked back. “Yes, Kevin?”

“Like, how much do you have to pay?”

Mayne sighed. “I have pursued every lead I have to get the money, as have others in the production team, Kevin.”

Madelyn chimed in from where she sat. “Yeah. Give me ten days and I can get the show bankrolled by half a dozen people from New York to San Francisco. But not by tonight.”

Marco said “I’ve got a couple of people in blighty who’ll put up the cash, but it’s the same fuckin’ thing; they can’t get it to us by tonight.”

“Sure, I understand that,” Redmond said, “but how much is it, anyway?”

Mayne looked him in the eye. “A little over twelve million, one hundred thousand dollars.”

“Will they take a cheque?”

OoO

It was a party, but instead of a wake it was a celebration. Rehearsal had finished, and even Madelyn hadn’t insisted on a full run, only polishing a few scenes. They had all been scenes that didn’t need Redmond. He, Barry and Mayne had taken a trip to the city, and there they’d visited two banks. The first was the Sydney branch of Redmond’s American branch, where they had astounded a cashier with a request for the biggest bank cheque he’d ever heard of. It had taken a while, because they’d been kicked upstairs to the manager, who had asked for identification and passwords, then had to speak to the head office in New York, where it had only just turned eight in the morning. They’d emerged, an hour and a half later, with a cheque made out to Mayne’s bank which was, fortunately,

only a block away. There, they'd handed over the cheque and demanded the deeds to the theatre. They got them. At the present time, they were blue-tacked to the overhead framework of the bar.

Redmond had explained to them. "I want the play to go on more than I've ever wanted anything before. Seven million bucks," he'd shrugged, "That's less than I got for my last film."

"That western," Mayne had said, "*The Silent Gun?*"

"Yeah," Redmond had smiled bitterly. "Good name for it. When I came on set the first day, the director pretty much said to me that I only had a couple of pages of dialogue in the whole shoot, but that I'd be in half the scenes. I'd epitomise the strong, silent hero of classic westerns, the force, the presence of the good man who would right wrongs, see justice done, and then ride away into the sunset. But I heard him say, as he went off with an assistant director, 'I hope the lunk swallowed that.' I called my agent about it, and he said 'You're getting twelve million and a percentage of the gross. Just do what they tell you and count the money.' The movie was number one the weekend it opened and made close to five hundred million at the box office and I had a piece of that. Then there's the videos and junk like the plastic guns."

Ed had sat stunned. He'd known Hollywood was a different world, but not *how* different. A national company's budget for an entire year would be less than Redmond had been paid for one movie.

"But you know what sold it, what made it a hit at the box office?" Redmond had shaken his head bitterly. "There was one scene where we were being chased by bad guys, and the heroine's horse gets hit by a bullet, she falls off and I dismount to save her, shoot it out with the bad guys in one of those long, slow-motion shots. She hadn't used a stunt woman, and we did the whole thing in one take. When she fell off the horse and sprawled against a rock, both tits fell out of her dress, and the camera pretty much stayed on her for the whole shot, with me gunning down the bad guys in the background. The producer said, later, that it was the shot that sold the movie."

Redmond was getting the full benefit of Claire Basset's generously exposed bosom at the bar right now, while Mayne, Ed, Marco and Madelyn sat in one of the booths while Barry got them another round of drinks. Their thoughts were all turned to the same thing; whether there would be any more problems before opening night. The theatre was theirs or, at least, it was Redmond's. For the moment, at least, they had no money troubles. They had seven days to get it running smoothly on the new stage. That, according to Ed, would be enough time. They'd be ready for the tech run in five days and the full dress in six. Marco said the set would be ready. Linda was backstage hanging the last of the costumes to arrive back from the cleaners right now, before she came down and joined them. Madelyn had sworn that it would be ready if she had to hold all their families to ransom. There was only one cloud hanging over their thoughts.

“So,” Mayne said as Barry joined them with the drinks, “what can we do about Jimmy McHenry?”

“Do you think he’ll try something again?” Barry said.

Mayne shrugged. “I don’t know. He must know that the cops are on to him.”

“Fuckin’ cops must have known about him for years, if he’s a player like Ed said,” Marco butted in. “If he’s worried about somebody comin’ on to his patch and he’s pissed off about someone not showin’ him due respect, he’ll try to stop the show goin’ up. We can expect to hear from him again.”

Ed nodded. It was a gloomy prediction, but that was the way things worked in this town, and always had.

“But what does he want?” Mayne said. “I mean Charles said that he runs the entertainment business in Sydney, that’s why he’s pissed off about the Queensland backing for this show, but what does he get out of it? Why is it so important to him?”

Ed glanced around at the others. They were all, including Barry, looking askance at Mayne, as if they couldn’t believe his innocence. “This is the way it works,” Ed said. “It’s basically a protection racket that extends to all the major venues. The Opera House wouldn’t be in the net, nor would a couple of other places that are government connected, but just about everywhere else would pay a levy to him to make sure there weren’t any hold-ups in supplies, that there were no inconvenient strikes, that trucks carrying sets didn’t get flat tyres, that no-one set off stink bombs during a performance, roofs didn’t develop leaks, etcetera. He’d rarely need to do anything as direct as setting fire to a place. Most of his protection money would come from the big clubs, rather than theatres. If word gets around that an independent production can snub him, he loses face and maybe a few other shows will get the same idea. It’s personal now. His credibility’s at stake.”

“So he all he wants us to do is pay him off?”

“That would be about the size of it, I think, but it might take more money than before.” Ed said.

“So, let’s go and talk to him, find out how much he wants. We can negotiate. If he’ll wait until we get some cash flow, we can pay him off.”

Ed said “Do you think that’s the best thing to do?”

Mayne looked at him. “Kevin said that he wanted this show to go on more than he ever wanted anything. So do I. If it takes paying off a local hood, I’ll do that.”

“You’ll have to arrange some sort of meeting,” Barry said.

“That shouldn’t be too hard, I can get a lead from the cops.”

Marco took a long sip of his beer and looked over at Mayne with an odd expression on his face, half smile and half snarl. “Yeah, well, mate,” he said gently. “When you arrange this meeting, I’d like to come along with you and meet the man who burned down my fuckin’ set. I wouldn’t mind havin’ a few words with ‘im as well.”

OoO

As Ed was leaving, Leon Tailor drew him aside to where they couldn’t be heard. “I reckon I’m pretty stuffed for taking over from Kevin,” he said.

Ed nodded. “I think he’s pretty rock-solid in the part now, mate. Sorry.”

Leon shook his head and smiled. “Don’t worry about it, mate. Truth be told, he’s a good bloke, and I wouldn’t want to take that part away from him. He’s worked his fucking heart and soul out to get it right.” He laughed. “He’s worked much harder than I ever worked at anything. The curse of talent, eh?”

“You’re a bloody good actor, Leon, and I’ll make sure you get time on stage.”

“Yeah, I know you will, mate. And until someone gets the ‘flu, I’m happy to be the third spear carrier from the left, you know, ‘An attendant lord, one that will do to start a progress, swell a scene or two.’ It’s no pressure, and, in a funny way, I’m glad of that. I have to tell you, I was getting a bit tired.”

“What? Tired of theatre.”

“No, tired of being me.” He looked away from Ed, into the dark auditorium, and his voice was soft. “Everyone expects me to fuck it up because I can’t keep my dick in my pants. I’ve had offers, right from being brought into this show.”

“Claire?”

“A gentleman never tells, but yeah, she was one of them. It’s like I was giving out stickers they could put in their scrap books.” He turned his head back, and in the half-light he looked sad and weary, and just a little old. “When I was younger I used to think I could count coup, carve notches in the bed head, and you know how it worked. I just never thought it would happen to me, that I’d be a trophy fuck.” He bowed his head, shook it and gave a bitter chuckle as he said, “Bugger of a thing, hubris, isn’t it?”

Ed put his hand in Leon’s shoulder, and said “You’re still a bloody good actor.”

“Thanks, mate, but I might be leaving my run a little bit late to prove it. Reputation follows you around, and mine isn’t a good one. I need the big role, and I’m not sure that I’ll get that now.”

Ed didn’t know what to say, so he just squeezed Leon’s shoulder and said “Early rehearsal tomorrow. You’d better get home.”

“Yeah, mate. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Ed watched him walk off, at first slumped, as if he had the cares of the world on his shoulders, then gradually resuming the cocky strut that was normal to him. *Bloody actors*, he thought, *always on stage*.

OoO

It was an early run, and it went well until midway through the second act. There was a scene where Henry referred to his dog, making unfavourable comparison between him and the courtiers who surrounded the throne. Bruno had played his part uncomplainingly, as ever, until he suddenly stood up and started scratching furiously.

“Fuck!” Madelyn had yelled. “Has that mutt got fleas or something? Take it from Greg’s entrance, and get Bruno settled down. All he has to do is lie there for a few minutes. The great lump should find that easy enough.”

They began again. Henry got as far in his speech as “--- this quiet hound” when Bruno rolled onto this back and wriggled against the floor, demonstrating that he was really a male dog.

“Well, that’ll get a fucking laugh.” Madelyn said bitterly. “Can somebody go and get Marco so we can find out what’s wrong with the animal.”

Leon Tailor had been in the wings, shadowing Greg. He spoke up and said “I’ll go. Marco was up in the office last I saw him, talking to Adam.”

Leon was back in a few minutes, trailing not only Marco, but Tess Bryant. Bruno wagged his tail and let his tongue hang out as they both sat down on the stage next to him. Tess called out “What’s been happening?”

Madelyn said “The mutt can’t keep still. I need him to keep still for this scene, which lasts a little over three minutes, and then he’s offstage. He keeps scratching.”

Marco said “It’s probably bleedin’ fleas from this geriatric theatre.” He stroked Bruno affectionately and said “There, there, mate, it’s going to be alright.”

Tess gently parted the fur on Bruno's back and examined him in a few places. "It's not fleas," she said. "There's a rash there. Looks like an allergic reaction. Does he have any allergies, Marco?"

"Nah, not that I know of. Poor bugger."

"Where's he been sleeping?"

"In my room while we're at the hotel. He curls up on one of the couches in the bar most of the time, while I'm workin' down there. When I'm backstage he finds a spot out of the way where he can watch what's going on."

Tess looked more closely at Bruno's back. "Could be dust mites. I'll bet that couch hasn't been vacuumed properly." She looked at Marco. "It's okay. I've got a cream in my bag that will take away the irritation, and there's a shampoo you can get that will get rid of the rash. If you get that couch vacuumed properly, it shouldn't happen again."

"You want me to get your bag?" Leon said.

"Please. It's under the table where dad was working from the photocopies of the manuscript."

"Will he be okay for the show? Madelyn asked. "We don't have a canine understudy, and I'm not sure Leon would fit into a dog-suit."

Tess shook her head. "He'll be fine. It's only a little rash and the cream will take the irritation away immediately."

"Bruno'll be alright, you'll see. He's a trouper," Marco said.

Leon arrived back with the bag and handed it to Tess. "Thanks," she said and opened it to look for the cream. She looked back up at him for a second. "We haven't been introduced. I'm Tess Bryant."

"Leon Tailor." He waved his hand around at the stage. "Understudy and general dogsbody."

She laughed and took out a grey tube of ointment. "From what Madelyn said a few moments ago, that's closer to the truth than you think."

"Okay, okay," Madelyn said, "let's all take a break. How long will that stuff take to work?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Right. Everybody take thirty minutes, and then right back here and we'll go from the top of the act."

Ed came on stage as they broke, and could just hear Leon say to Tess "Fancy a cup of coffee?" He shook his head and grinned, then went on to find Marco.

“Are you ready to take a little trip?” he said when he discovered Marco concentrating on his sketch pad down in the bar with Bruno at his feet.

“Why?” Marco said, putting down his pencil.

“That meeting you wanted to sit in on. It’s arranged for thirty minutes from now.”

Marco patted Bruno, told him to be a good dog, and stood up. “Mate,” he said, “that is one meeting I am not missing.”

OoO

Fenian Holdings was a suite of offices in a small building at the racecourse end of Randwick. It wasn’t particularly flash, but it wasn’t run-down, either. Respectable, with offices let to solicitors and companies with names like ‘Tropical House-Share’ and “Advantage Imports.” They all had outer offices with the doors open and secretaries behind desks, and inner doors that were closed.

Fenian Holdings was on the third floor, and the lift was small, slow and smelled slightly of cigarettes and urine. Mayne, Ed, Barry and Marco fitted in to it tightly, but none of them were going to wait at the bottom for it to come back down. McHenry’s suite was larger than the others they’d seen, still with an open outer office, but with three doors off it, all of them closed. The secretary was a statuesque brunette with headphones on, looking at a computer screen and typing as they came in. She smiled at them and held up one finger, finished a line, took the headphones off and asked them, in an Oxbridge accent, how she could help them.

Barry said “Mr Mayne is here to see Mr McHenry.”

She said “One moment,” picked up a ‘phone and pressed a button. It rang a couple of times and then she said “Mr Mayne is here.” She listened for a moment and nodded, then put the ‘phone down. She smiled and said “Mr McHenry is just finishing up a piece of business. If you take a seat, he’ll be with you in a minute.” She turned back to pick up her headphones while Mayne and the others started to move toward the chairs.

“Nah, I don’t reckon we’ll do that, darling,” Marco said, leaning on the desk.

She stared at him and said “I beg your pardon?” in an affronted tone.

“Look, luv, you and me know that Little Jimmy’s just sittin’ in there on his fat arse smoking a fag. He want’s to sit down and wait to show what a big man he is. Well, we haven’t got time to waste, even if he has, so you pick up that ‘phone and tell him we know he’s gigantic, oooh, so big, and now that that’s out of the way we’ll see him right away.”

The secretary turned pink and picked up the 'phone. She muttered a few things into it, casting glances at Marco as she did, then hung up and said "Mr McHenry will see you now." She got up, smoothed her very short skirt and led them to the middle door, opened it and ushered them inside.

Little Jimmy McHenry said "That'll be all, Kitty. You can leave these gents with me."

He was a man of ordinary height, with hair that had once been blonde but was now going white, pale-skinned with a few broken veins showing on his cheeks. He wasn't fat, but a pot-belly was showing under his jacket. He sat behind a wide desk of dark wood, bare of everything but the 'phone, a blotter and a pen set standing in an onyx holder. His voice was a soft Irish brogue that was intended to be charming, but was as false as a whore's smile.

"Well, Mr Mayne. You requested this little meeting. What can I do for you?"

Ed butted in. "You can offer us seats, for a start." He looked around. "Don't get up, we can use these couple by your desk, and I'll grab another couple from those against the wall."

He did that while Barry and Mayne sat in the two leather armchairs in front of the desk. "Mr McHenry," Mayne said, looking askance at Ed as he dragged chairs over for him and Marco, "I'm sorry I didn't respond to your earlier call. I have reason to think that we can do business together."

"And how's that, Mr Mayne?"

"I believe you have some interests in the entertainment industry."

"Some. I have fingers in many pies." He smiled at them contentedly.

"I'd like to discuss maintenance and security with you. I'm sure that we could come to an arrangement that was beneficial to both of us."

"Ah," McHenry said, smiling, "that would be that little panto you're putting on down at the Liz. Terrible thing that fire. I hope no-one was hurt."

Ed felt Marco tense next to him, but he said nothing.

"No, we were very fortunate in that. The fire service got there very quickly."

"And, let me get this clear, you'd like me to provide a security service to ensure that such things didn't occur again."

"I think we understand each other, Mr McHenry. I'm sure we could negotiate a fee for such a service for the duration of the run."

“Oh, I’m sure we could.” He put the tips of his fingers together, pursed his lips and ruminated for a moment. “Our starting figure would be ten million dollars a week, backdated to the start of rehearsals.”

“What!” Mayne sat bolt upright in his chair. “That’s impossible. You’re joking, aren’t you?”

McHenry’s veneer of civility dropped away and he leaned forward. “No, brother it’s you who’s joking. You come on to my patch with your little carnival, without so much as a hello or by your leave, backed by those wogs up in Surfer’s, and then you just expect to kiss and make-up. No, boyo, you can take your chances, but I’ll tell you now, if I was a betting man, I’d be putting money on that show never opening.”

Mayne took a deep breath. “Mr McHenry, you’re a businessman, as am I, and I’m making you a business proposition. I appreciate your feelings, and I can understand the intensity of your response, but I’m sure we can come to some reasonable agreement, as businessmen.”

McHenry laughed and sat back in his chair. “You just don’t get the picture, my bold boy.” He shook his head. “This is my turf, and I say what shows go on and what shows don’t go on. And I don’t want to do business with you.” He leaned forward again. “Not at any price, and you can tell that to your masters up north.”

Barry said “But surely . . .”

“When I want to hear from you, Fairy Barry, I’ll tickle your wings.” He shook his head again. “Now you can go back to your big, expensive pile of bricks and start to worry as little things start to go wrong, and wonder when one of those little things will be a big thing. It’s not a nice place you’re in, but you got yourself there because you did business with the wrong people. Now you can fuck off.”

They sat there in silence as McHenry leaned back in his chair again, his hands behind his head, and a wide smile on his face. Then Marco began to clap slowly.

“Oh, fuckin’ good performance,” he said. “You should be on the stage yourself. Not a big part, but some little comic role. You’d get laughs, you would.”

The smile vanished from McHenry’s face as Marco got up and put both hands on the polished surface of the desk. “Listen, you little shit, I was walkin’ the East End when the Kray brothers were stickin’ people to the floor with boning knives and drinkin’ at my old man’s pub when they collected their weekly pay-off, so you don’t scare me one little bit. You burnt my fuckin’ set down, and every one of my sets is like a child to me. I put the sweat and soul into it to make it something special, every fuckin’ time. So, this is personal, you bog-Irish turd.”

Ed saw McHenry move a hand towards the ledge of the desk. He stood up and leaned against the door, folded his arms and looked at McHenry steadily, as if he'd done this sort of thing before.

“Don't ring for your fuckin' bully boys,” Marco said. “What're they goin' to do? Shoot us? Rough us up? The fuckin' cops would love to get that much on you. Nah, mate, you stick to what you know, hangin' about in dark alleys and smackin' people over the head when they're lookin' the other way, like you did to Barry. And if we was really threatening, dangerous people, the sort that would pick up that nice, heavy pen stand and bounce it off your fuckin' forehead, d'you reckon that those boys in the other office would get here in time to stop that?”

McHenry's hand moved back.

“Lovely. Nice to see you understand common sense.” He took a pen out of the holder and played with it idly. “Now, this is what's goin' to happen. There's people watchin' the place now, people you don't know anything about, and they're not cops. They were the ones who told us about you settin' the fire.” He held up a hand. “Don't bother to fuckin' deny it. Now,” he leaned forward again, “if there's one incident, one little tiny incident that we track back to you, we'll get those people who are not the police to check on some of the international connections you might have, and talk to others about things like money laundering and racketeering. They might already have enough evidence to shut you down right now, who knows? Or our masters up north might decide something even worse might be appropriate.” He took the pen and deliberately signed his name with it across the desk, scarring the polished wood. “You know what us fuckin' Italians are like when we're upset.” He tossed the pen into McHenry's lap. “That's just to remind you who's who. We'll leave now. Been nice talking to you.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The ride down in the lift and the taxi ride back to the theatre were almost silent, as if people were reluctant to talk about the scene in McHenry's office, but finally, as they went backstage, Ed said "Where the fuck did you get that little speech back there from?"

Marco shrugged and gave a half-smile. "Never could stand fuckin' bullies. That bastard reminded me of a teacher I had in school; smarmy prick to everybody in charge, bully to everybody else except his little favourites. He told me I'd never graduate, and to do all the trade courses, go out and help my dad run the pub. Laughed at the idea of me goin' to art school." He smiled at a memory. "The day I graduated I went down to the pub where he drank. Took a couple of mates with me from college. We followed 'im as he stumbled out of the pub and backed 'im into an alley. I asked 'im if he remembered me, and he did, so I told 'im there were a couple of things I wanted to show 'im." He laughed. "He pissed 'imself when one of me mates handed me what looked like a baton. Started blubberin' about 'is terrible home life and all. I walked up to 'im and took my degree out of the tube it was in and showed it to 'im. Told 'im how he'd said I'd never do anything but pull beers in a pub. He blubbered and said it was school policy, and it was all the fault of the principal and the school and how it was all the other teachers' fault, tryin' to weasel out of it any way he could, telling me it was all so that they could get the numbers right. I just laughed at him and walked away. He called out to me, asked me what else it was that I had to show him, and I turned around and showed him the tape recorder. I'd got down every lyin' weaselin' word he'd said. I left him, and mailed the tape to the principal, private-like, on the Monday."

Barry stared him. "I don't think I'd like to have you for an enemy," he said.

"But the rest of that stuff, about the Krays and paying protection and everything, was that true?" Mayne asked.

"Yeah. Dad's pub was on their patch, and I knew all about the payoffs to make everything run smooth. Reggie and Ronnie came in a few times to check that their boys were doin' their job right." He shook his head. "They were proper scary bastards. I was fourteen when Nipper Read copped 'em for good. It was like the clouds went away and we could see the sun." He looked at them steadily. "Ronnie nearly put a bullet in me once, when I saw 'im kill my mate's dog when I was about twelve. He was out the back talkin' to some blokes deliverin' cases of booze, and helping himself to a couple, when he got the idea that this mutt that belonged to my mate Jack was a police spy. I was out there kickin' a ball around. He pulled a fuckin' gun and shot the poor bloody dog, then and there. I was just watchin' with me gob open, and he turned on me yellin' that I was a witness. Lucky that Reggie came out of the pub then and calmed 'im down. I ran from there back inside and me dad gave me the first glass of whisky I'd ever had. I 'ad another one the day the Krays went into the nick, to celebrate." He

shrugged again. "That little pissant McHenry wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the streets where I grew up." He checked his watch. "Gotta go. There was some lavender tulle comin' in that I need to dress a couple of the flats."

OoO

The rehearsal was going suspiciously well. Madelyn was in her accustomed seat in the twelfth row, Linda was with her, but both were watching intently, and no notes were being written. Madelyn just nodded a few times as she watched. Ed hoped it was auspicious, and went up to the bio box to see if everything was okay there. Terry was watching for cues and listening to Bec, the third-year NIDA student who was the best of the volunteers, on the radio intercom that had been set up. Ed heard her say "Lighting cue twenty-eight, go," and Terry did a slow cross-fade that lit the downstage area, leaving upstage in darkness. He sat back and relaxed, then noticed Ed. "Bec's doing a good job down there."

"Taking my place, is she?" Ed looked around, comparing the neatness and precision of the box with the clutter and chaos he'd seen in the beginning. All the lines were numbered and labelled, cue sheets were neatly in place on a sheet of plywood, held down by a non-reflective plastic sheet. The floor was clear of anything unnecessary. Dim, angled lights with red shades lit the dimmer board and the cue sheets. A set of shelves had been erected that held boxes, each one neatly and clearly labelled with its contents, and a range of lamps in their holders, in case one blew. "You've been busy," Ed said to Terry. He walked over to the dimmer board and noticed there was a thick file sitting next to it with 'emergency' written on it. He picked it up. "What's this?"

"Different lighting plots using the existing lights if one or several lamps blow during a show." He checked what was happening on stage. "There's another cue in about seventy seconds, and that's the end of act two. Madelyn usually takes a break after that for fifteen minutes or so." He looked back at Ed. "There's been some funny stuff happen with this show. I didn't want to take any chances. For instance," he tapped one of the sliders, "if this lamp blows, which is a soft Fresnel over up-stage left, I can pretty much get the same effect by bringing up these two," he tapped a couple of others, "to about seventy percent."

"Lighting cue twenty-nine, stand by," came over the intercom.

Terry leaned forward and pressed the reply button twice. "It's just a blackout, I only have to bring the master down."

"It really has been a busy show," Ed said. "What, with one thing and another."

"How much did we wind up paying McHenry?"

“Nothing.”

“What!”

“Lights cue twenty-nine, go.”

Terry brought the lights down. “How did that happen?”

“Okay,” Bec said, “twenty minute break, then lights thirty and thirty-one.”

“Thanks, Bec,” Terry said into the intercom.

“It wound up being something of a confrontation,” Ed said, and filled him on the details.

“I hope it wasn’t too much bluff.”

“What part?”

“About people watching us who’ll dob him in if something happens to the show.”

“Yeah, I hope so too. Is Tony around?”

“He said he’d come in after his course finished for the day. Should be here about four-thirty.”

“I might ask him if he knows anything.”

Everything seemed under control, so Ed wandered down below the stage to check with Mick. There was no-one there, so he walked over to the dressing rooms. There were two types of dressing room ranged beyond the pits, the small ones for the principals and the larger ones for those playing the smaller parts, one for males and one for females. He smiled. He could remember theatres where there was just one dressing room for everybody, with costumes hung on a rack in the middle and a mirror on each side of the room. No room for modesty in those places. You’d come in from a scene tearing off a costume and grabbing a new one from the rack, naked bodies elbowing each other to get a place in front of the mirror to check their make-up, reaching over to get the slap, borrowing stuff from each other to get it right, throwing their new costume on and racing back onto the stage. There’d been shows when there just had not been enough time between scenes, and he’d follow actors down to the stage doing up belts or hooking up the backs of dresses.

He took a deep breath. The smell was like no other, no matter how many times or how thoroughly the room had been cleaned. The cheap perfume smell of talcum powder, waxy smell of greasepaint, the odour of costumes that had been worn too often, old socks, cigarettes, sweaty bodies, and over all the faint taint of flop sweat, that peculiar rankness that comes into even the most confident cast as they contemplate drying or missing a cue, or giving the wrong cue or breaking up on stage or

delivering the wrong line or going on with their flies undone or their bra strap breaking or any of the million other things that could go wrong. The only thing that could save them was the others in the show feeding them lines, holding their collapsing dress, going back to the right point in the script.

That was one of the tests of the real pro, to not panic when things went wrong, and to rely on others, to trust others in the cast and crew. He'd seen one man in a period drama enter on the wrong cue, right when he saw something that he really shouldn't, realise it, close his eyes, raise his arms and continue slowly to the other side of the stage. The actress on stage had picked it up and told her lover that Papa was sleep-walking again. He'd heard a cast improvise five minutes of Shakespeare while they waited for someone to make a missed entrance, and never miss a beat. It was all because of trust, and because you knew they'd do it for you, every time. If it was a good cast, it was a family.

A clattering sound interrupted his thoughts and made him turn around. It was Arthur Bassing, carrying a large black leather case. "Sorry," he said. "I wonder if you could point me to the forestage pit. We're supposed to set up there for a music rehearsal. The rest of the boys should be down here soon. I didn't want to go through the theatre while the rehearsal was on."

"That was a good idea. Madelyn might show you another place to put your crumhorn if you did."

"Ah. That makes me glad that I advised the rest of the chaps to come in via the stage door." There was movement, and he looked up at the stairs. "And speak of the devil; here they are now."

Four people came down the stairs. They all carried leather cases of different shapes and sizes. Arthur nodded to them. "That's Davey," he pointed to a large blonde man struggling with two cases, "on lute and viol de gamba. Mickey plays recorders, Martin on sackbut and Trevor on flute, but he doubles on drums."

Ed regarded them with a quizzical eye. "Will you be loud enough to fill the theatre?"

Arthur laughed softly and the rest chuckled. "Have no fears about that," he said. "These instruments were designed to be heard over rowdy feasts. Now, where can we set up?"

Ed listened for a moment to what was happening upstairs. "They're close to the end of an act," he said. "I'll take you forward to the pit when they break for the change. Will it take you long to set up?"

"No, not at all. We can take the instruments out of their cases here and all we need then is a few chairs. It will take only a few minutes to get into position."

"Okay. Ed hesitated, and then asked "What are you going to play?"

“Oh, the standards; some Byrd, Bull and Dowland, with some Gibbons and Blitheman for good measure. Not absolutely appropriate to the period, but it will sound well enough.”

“You’ve worked out the music cues?”

“Yes, dear Barry was kind enough to give us a set of cue lines for all the acts, and he assured us that there would be a visual cue, and a cue from the stage manager as well.”

That was the first Ed had heard of it, but he supposed there wouldn’t be a great deal of a problem in adding the cues to his script. “Has Madelyn heard you yet?”

“We played for her for a little while yesterday, and she proclaimed herself charmed. We’ll go through the whole thing this afternoon, just running our cues.”

Maddy? Charmed? Well, Ed thought, you learn something new every day. He cocked an ear and worked out where the act was. “Okay, we’ve got about five minutes for you to get your instruments out and grab some chairs. Let’s go.”

Tony Bryant came in, as predicted, about four-thirty. He seemed happy about something. Ed caught up with him as he was going up the stairs to where Adam was at work on the manuscript. “G’day Ed,” he said with a big smile. “Dad still up there?”

“I haven’t seen him come down.”

“I’ve got my new posting,” and he nearly did a little jig on the steps out of happiness.

“Infantry, like you wanted?”

“Even better, mate; even better. The army being the army, they ignored my request for a light infantry posting and they’ve transferred me to the Incident Response Regiment.”

“Oh, good.” Ed was a little mystified.

“It’s part of Special Operations Command, responding to all sorts of incidents, all over the world. I’ll be in the Intelligence section. I have to tell dad.” He charged on up the stairs before Ed had a chance to ask him about Marco’s statement about the purported watchers.

They’ve probably got enough to talk about, he thought as he went back down. Tony’s new job and Adam getting ready for his big debate with Holden Deane tomorrow night. He had his own problems, too. The tech run was the day after tomorrow, and he hadn’t worked with Arthur and his boys yet. The actors had come off stage about twenty minutes ago, and Madelyn was going through the cues with Arthur. They’d run cues in about half an hour, and work with the cast tomorrow. If they were

lucky, they'd get a couple of run throughs to make it work smoothly. Ed had already marked up his script with the cues, but that would change as it ran. It would be another late evening.

Most of the cast were out of the dressing rooms and off to the bar before heading home, but Henry was still lounging in his, sipping on a cup of tea. He waved Ed in and pointed to a pot on the dressing table. "Help yourself. It's freshly made, and there are a couple of mugs behind that rather large jar of cold cream. There's milk over in that ice bucket, and I think I have some sugar around somewhere, if you indulge in that particular barbarism."

Ed poured himself a mug and added three sugars.

"Gah, I don't know how you can drink it like that."

Ed took a swig. "I got into the habit in the Navy. Hot, strong, sweet tea first thing in the morning or on a long night watch was pretty much the fuel the Navy ran on."

"With a tot of rum in it when you spliced the mainbrace."

Ed laughed. "Jesus, that's something I've never done. I was an engineer. Anyhow, the rum ration was phased out before I joined the Navy."

"Another grand old tradition destroyed by the march of time. I hope the tradition of the opening night piss-up hasn't gone the same way."

"Not that I've heard. After the bloody work to get this show to open, we deserve one." He took another swig. "What are you still doing here? I thought you'd be up with the others and then on the way home."

"Oh, I volunteered to help Maddy with the musicians by reading the cues, although my experience of musicians is that they require a whip and a chair in most instances."

"I think you might find that Arthur's group is a bit different."

"How so?"

"Well, he's a member of the MCC, for a starter."

"My dear boy, so is Mick Jagger. So am I, for that matter. Like so much in England, it's the Old Boys Network. I was unlucky enough to be born into it." He put down his cup. It was a delicate thing of palest cream bone china. Henry noticed Ed looking at it. "One of my little actor's superstitions. I was given that cup before my very first West End engagement, and I've had it with me ever since, packed

away in its own travelling box. I have a cup of tea at the thirty minute call, and a quick pee at the five, and then I'm ready for the show."

Ed nodded knowingly. Lots of people knew about some of the superstitions of the theatre, such as whistling backstage or not mentioning Macbeth, but there were others, such as no live flowers or real jewellery on stage, and he'd lost count of the little things that actors did or had to have with them to ensure good luck, or to keep away bad luck. Lucky charms, little statues, little rituals, bad luck colours, good luck colours. Then there were the things that actors did to prepare for a show. No matter how some protested that they just walked on stage, remembered the lines and avoided the furniture, they all did something to get into character, ranging from a couple of minutes deep breathing or practising dialogue to an hour of deep introspection. Henry's cup of tea was a minor superstition, by comparison.

"How did your little interview with the vile Irishman go?" Henry asked.

Ed looked at him over his mug. "How did you know about that?"

"Oh, dear boy, this is a theatre. No secrets last very long. Marco was fuming yesterday about something and I asked him what was wrong. He replied that he didn't have the time to replace part of the set that had been burned by that Irish . . . Well, I won't repeat what he called him for fear of offending your delicate ears, but sufficient to be said that he laid the whole story bare, including the involvement of one of Her Majesty's agencies." He picked up his watch from the dressing table and checked the time. "Ten minutes. You'll be wanted too, I suspect."

"You're right." Ed finished his tea and put the mug down. "For your information, it went very well, although Marco surprised me a bit."

"How so?"

"Firstly, because he proved to be a very tough little nut indeed, tough enough to put the wind up McHenry, I think. The other thing is that I think he's organised something through Tony. He said something about there'd be people watching the place in case McHenry had any thoughts about sabotage."

"Well, you don't get through life in the East End without learning a little rough and tumble, and if you have artistic tendencies that is even more true. As for the other, well, I don't think you should bother Tony with questions."

"Why?"

Henry hung his head. "It's all my fault. I gave my brother a call when I found out what was going on. He is a member of the House of Lords, as you know, and a card-carrying Tory, as well. He called a few elder constituents of the Old Boys' Network, and words were whispered into ears at a very senior level. The words that were whispered were along the lines of being associated with a show that went under because of a fire set by a gangster, an Irish immigrant, at that, would not be a very good thing, and that it would be much better that the show go up on schedule, and that anything that happened with Henry was so far in the past that it wouldn't matter, even to paranoid royal snots. A word to the wise, you know. He called back to say that there would be friendly eyes on our little production from now on. Too late to do anything about that wretched Deane person, but I have faith in Adam. He's playing on his home ground, after all."

"What about Deane?"

"Oh, that was another little plot. That's where the copy of the script that was nicked got to." He checked his watch again. "We'd better go up. Maddy will be raking the stage with her hind claws if we're not there on time."

He gave a brilliant smile and exited stage left.

"Well, bugger me," Ed said, and followed him.

The music rehearsal went surprisingly smoothly, for all that the instruments were unusual. Arthur and the boys turned out to be very professional and very understanding of what was needed for the play. "It's really just a big wedding," Arthur said during a break, "and it actually doesn't take as long as some of the weddings we've played. Madelyn is also far more understanding than some of the bridezillas we've played for, who change their minds about what music they want up to and including during the ceremony." He rolled his eyes. "There was one who didn't quite understand that, even though she was getting married on the eighteenth of December, it would be difficult for us to play the 1812 Overture. When I explained that it required church bells and cannon, she retorted that it was my problem to find the instruments. Fortunately, she changed her mind the next day to the Dead March from Saul, which we could play, and did, with some enthusiasm. It was, by the way, supposed to be a Viking themed ceremony."

It was all over now, lights down and everybody had gone home except for the head mechanist, Mick, who was staying downstairs as a night watchman, and Ed, who was locking up. He was meeting Linda and Barry at a little Greek restaurant a few blocks away for a late dinner. He looked up at the dark auditorium from the stage as he switched off the workers. It was an odd feeling, this close to opening. Even if there had been chaos, it still felt just a little anticlimactic. The hard work had been done. The preparations had been made, the bride, to carry Arthur's imagery a little further, was ready

to be walked down the aisle and the big moment was at hand, but it would be, Ed thought, a relief, rather than a triumph. He'd worked like a navvy to bring it to this point, along with the others, and from the moment the curtain went up on the opening night, the show was his to run. If he'd done his job right, and he'd done the best he knew how, everything from that point on would be housekeeping; calling cues, keeping everything together, making sure the cast didn't get pissed before the show. But that was the easy part.

Madelyn was too good, he thought. She'd bitched, bullied and shouted the cast into giving the performances of their lives. He thought they loved her for it. He certainly felt like he'd be losing a mate when she went from here to some other show. But that applied to all of them, including the latecomers, the bit players, like Tony and Tess and Bec and the NIDA people. They were the ones all too often forgotten about, the anonymous workers who played important parts, but never got their names up in lights. They were family, too. He shook his head. It always felt that way, and when the show ended its run, it was like breaking up a family. "Jesus," he laughed to himself, "this is a bit previous to be getting post-coital."

He switched off the last of the workers and went to what Barry had promised would be the best *Kolokythoanthoi* and *Païdakia* outside of the Cyclades. Plus a couple of bottles of retsina.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The young man in the mortar board and gown was babbling as he guided the party from the theatre up to the Holme Building. “We put it in the Withdrawing Room. It’s packed! We never expected so many people. We’ve opened up the Chancellor’s room as well, but there will be people outside in the garden.”

“Just as long as there’s enough room for us, Freddie Freshman,” Madelyn growled.

“Oh, we reserved some seats at the front for you. Deane’s party is on the government side, and you’re in opposition.”

“Well, that’s just ducky.” She turned to the others. “Can someone explain to me what the fuck he just said?”

“It’s a parliamentary style debate,” Barry said quickly. “There’s a speaker at the front of the room. Adam and his supporters will be sitting on the speaker’s right, Deane and his people will be sitting on the left.”

“Do we get to speak?”

The young man butted in. “You can, but not until the first speakers for the house and the opposition have presented their cases.”

Barry said “That’s not proper parliamentary style. Who’s on the teams?”

“We’ve adapted it for tonight. There’ll only be the leaders of the government and the opposition, and they can call on any member of their supporters to act as a speaker for their side. Sorry, but it had to be organised quickly.”

“Jesus, they could have told us!” Madelyn said.

“It’s okay,” Tony said in reply. “Dad’s pretty cluey about this sort of thing.”

“Did you tell him that Deane had a copy of Alonzo’s script?”

“Yeah. He just laughed and said that it wouldn’t do him much good. Then he asked me to make a phone call to a couple of people in cryptography and analysis. He talked to them for a while, and I think he got one of them to come down and see him.”

“Fuckin’ dramas,” Marco said. “It’s us who’re doin’ the play, not Deane.”

“That’s Dad’s problem; he always wanted to work in theatre.”

They shut up then, because they were led to the front row of seats near Adam Bryant, seated alone at a table piled with reference works, wearing his full academic regalia of dark blue and scarlet.

“What’s that medal on the white ribbon around his neck?” Ed asked.

“Ah, Dad’s proud of that. It’s the Vance Medal for Shakespeare Research. It’s only awarded when the committee of the Vance Foundation reckons there’s a work of sufficient merit. Dad got it about eight years ago for his book on the differences and similarities in the first and second folios. Bloody gigantic thing it was. Over twelve hundred pages.”

“Deane seems pissed off about something.”

“Maybe it’s about that. Y’see, he hasn’t got one.”

All the discussion died away, because a stately old gentleman in a gorgeous black gown dripping with gold had stood up and rapped his gavel for silence. Another one in equally fine dress with only a hint less gold trim stood up beside him and bellowed out “Pray silence for the speaker for tonight’s debate, the Honourable Dr Peter Ransom, OA, Chancellor of the University of Sydney.”

The rustle of talk and shuffling of feet gradually died away. The Chancellor looked out over the crowd and gave a nod to his companion, who resumed his seat. “The motion before the house tonight is one which has great import,” he said in the rolling tones of a practiced orator, “for both the academic world and the more mundane world of real life. I would call upon my esteemed colleague, the Honourable Dr Ralph Goodall, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney, to read the motion.”

“Why is it all so fucking formal?” Madelyn hissed to Barry.

“It’s all a show, dear,” he whispered. “It dresses up the gutter fight that’s going on in some semblance of propriety.”

“The motion for tonight’s debate,” the Vice Chancellor proclaimed, “is ‘This House Believes the play *Henry VII* is not by William Shakespeare.’” He nodded to the Chancellor and resumed his seat while that worthy stood once more.

“While we have departed from the protocol of parliamentary debate somewhat and lean more to the juridical processes, the House will still speak first for the motion. The Opposition will then speak against the motion. The House will then call upon witnesses or evidence in support of the motion, then the Opposition may call witnesses or evidence against the motion. Following this, the House will sum up its case and then the Opposition will have the opportunity of rebuttal. As is the practice in this forum, no new evidence may be introduced in summation or rebuttal.” He leaned forward, placing his spread fingers firmly upon the desk before him. “Then, ladies and gentlemen, I will call a

division of the honourable members in order to affirm or deny the motion. I rely on your wit and intelligence and the due diligence I am sure you will pay to the arguments presented to ensure that your decision is just and in the best traditions of these hallowed walls.” With that, he gave a nod to Deane and resumed his seat.

Ed had been looking around the room. “There aren’t any media here,” he muttered to Barry as Deane rose and shuffled through a few papers.

“There are,” Barry replied with a jerk of his head to the back of the room. “Those rather scruffy gentlemen with notebooks and pencils standing at the back.”

“What about TV?”

“The Chancellor said he didn’t want this turned into a media scrum, so he banned them from the campus for the night. There are busloads of them set up in Parramatta Road.”

“He can do that?”

“Oh, yes; this is Commonwealth land and they need permission to come on to it. Hush now, Deane’s going to start.”

“Mister Speaker,” Deane said in confident tones, “my esteemed Opposition, honourable members of the house.”

“First time me member’s been called honourable,” Marco whispered, just loud enough to be heard, causing a few smothered giggles.

“My colleagues and I firmly believe that the play Henry VII, which I believe is intended to open in three days, was not written by William Shakespeare.” He gazed around at them, as if challenging anyone to contradict his statement. “Despite the fact that we have been denied access to the manuscript itself, a fragment of the script has become available to us.”

“Yeah, ‘cos you nicked it,” Marco said sotto voce. This time the giggles were louder.

Deane went on as if nothing had happened. “This fragment has been subjected to stringent textual analysis, and we will bring forward experts who will prove that it could not have been written by Shakespeare. If the fragment is not his work, how can the rest of the script be his work?” he glared at Marco, daring him to interject again. “Primary among the reasons that this alleged script is not Shakespeare’s work is that there is no historical record of it, as there is of the performance of every other play written by him. Scholars have tracked down contemporary references to all plays in performance and publication that are attributed to Shakespeare. How likely is it, I ask you, that a

play which forms part of the *Henriad*, a play which leads directly into the later Henry VIII, could be performed and not recorded, that it not be published as every other Shakespeare play was in the First Folio, with the exception of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*? If it was a contentious play in its time, where are the records to show the contention? There are none. Doctor Clerk-Maxwell,” he pointed to the young man who’d been on television with Bryant, “has made an exhaustive study of the period in which Shakespeare lived and worked, and he will tell you that there is no mention in any contemporary literature of the time of this play. There is no mention in the Stationers’ Register. There is no mention in the Accounts of the Master of Revels, two crucial repositories of hard evidence for any student of the period. And yet, my Honourable Opposition contends that this play both exists and was written by Shakespeare himself.”

He took a deep breath and continued, his voice becoming more forceful. “What we contend is that the play attributed to Shakespeare is by another hand, and that Doctor Bryant has been sold a pup.” He began to sound triumphant. “What does Doctor Bryant offer us in proof of his claim? That he has seen the original manuscripts and that they have been verified by experts in Japan and Russia.” He shook his head condescendingly. “It is interesting that the discoverer of the manuscripts had to resort to ‘experts’ whose first language is not English to assess whether the manuscript was written by the greatest playwright in the *English Language*.” He took a moment to look down his nose at Adam, who seemed to be cleaning his nails. “I would submit to you, ladies and gentlemen, that it would be far easier to fool someone from another culture other than English when even the English have been fooled in the past.” He pointed to the books piled on his table. “*Vortigern and Rowena*, a deliberate hoax by William Henry Ireland; *The Birth of Merlin*, another hoax by an unknown, written six years after Shakespeare’s death. Honest errors exist, as well; *Arden of Faversham*, *Edmund Ironside*, *The Puritan*, all attributed to Shakespeare and all conclusively demonstrated to be by other hands.”

“Thirty seconds,” the Chancellor broke in, and Deane nodded in acknowledgement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this play in question cannot possibly have been written by Shakespeare, that much is obvious. I leave to your judgement whether this is a case of an honest mistake being made by one who suffered, perhaps, from greater enthusiasm than critical objectivity, or whether it is a deliberate attempt to mislead the public. Thank you.”

There was a respectful round of applause, and Ed saw that the journalists at the back were scribbling furiously. “Is he right about all this?” he whispered to Madelyn.

“Some of it. But Adam doesn’t look too worried.” She indicated that Adam was still, apparently, cleaning his nails, not having taken notes or even looked up during Deane’s speech.

“Doctor Bryant,” the Chancellor called, “you may commence.”

Adam Bryant leaned back and steepled his hands, tapped the fingers together twice, adjusted his cap and got up. He bowed slightly to the Speaker, and towards Deane. “Mister Speaker,” he said, “my honourable opponent in this forum has not only attempted to cast doubt on the provenance of *Henry VII*, but on myself and my colleagues in its production. He bases his attack on historical record, the testimony of ‘experts’ and an analysis of what he admits is a very incomplete portion of the manuscript. I would venture to suggest that the portion to which he refers is the part-script of Alonzo Mafiori, the Papal Legate. I suggest this because it is the part-script which was stolen from the safe at the theatre. I would not venture to guess how it came into Doctor Deane’s hands, but I am sure that the circumstances were,” he paused for a moment and smiled, “totally innocent.”

“Oh, what a *bitch*,” Barry whispered admiringly.

“But let us deal with the script last, and the other matters first. First, the history. There is no record of the play in the Stationers’ Register or the Accounts of the Master of Revels, indeed, there is no contemporary reference to it at all. What he does not say is that Henry VII is not unique in this. There is no contemporary reference to *All’s Well That Ends Well*, yet it is universally accepted as a Shakespearean comedy. He states that it is not included in the First Folio; neither, as he admits, was *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Its absence from the Stationers’ Register is easily explicable: it was never published. Its absence from the Accounts of the Master of Revels is equally explicable: it was never performed in London. Many of Shakespeare’s plays were performed outside London, some of them having their first performance elsewhere, and the Master of Revels’ writ extended only to London theatres.”

He turned directly towards Deane and said “As my learned colleague knows, Folios are not always reliable. The First varies from copy to copy, the Second varies from the first in over 1,700 instances and the Third, while being the first to include *Pericles*, also includes six plays that weren’t Shakespeare’s.”

He turned back to the audience. “However, we contend that the play was performed, once, and that there is historical record of it. That performance was on the seventh of February, 1601, the day before Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, led his followers in an abortive rebellion against Queen Elizabeth. There had been a previous performance of *Richard II* at the Globe, but Essex wanted something more to incite his followers, and Henry Wriothesley, Shakespeare’s friend and sometime patron, prevailed upon Shakespeare to present Henry VII at Essex House. How do we know this? Because there is reference to such a play in Wriothesley’s journals, which are not secret, but kept at the British Museum. We also have reference to such a performance in the memoirs of Wriothesley in Boswell’s *Shakespeare* of 1821. The play is not named in either of these, but is referred to in these terms: ‘It was not a play that could be shown to any but those already committed to the cause, since it showed that

Henry was not a true king, so how could his issue be the true queen?” He smiled at Deane who was gradually turning pink. “I’ve modernised the language, but that quote is in Wriothlesley.”

He turned to address the Chancellor. “Mister Speaker,” he said, “my Honourable Opponent has proposed that there is no evidence of a contentious play called *Henry VII*. If it was not published, as he admits, and only had a single performance before a group of committed rebels, it is not surprising that there is no record of contention. But it is a play that, if shown publicly, would have succeeded in having Shakespeare’s head chopped off, in that the play redresses the proposition put forward in *Richard III*. In this play, Richard sent no assassin, but Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham took it upon himself to abduct the children and hide them away, to use them as a bargaining chip with whichever party was victor. Richard executed Buckingham for rebellion, but Sir James Tyrrell confessed, under torture, to Henry that the princes are still alive. This has been passed down to us as him confessing to the murder, but if the princes are still alive, as rumour had it at the time, Henry’s own claim to the throne, despite the Titus Regulus and marrying the princes’ sister, was shaky, to say the least. At a time in Tudor history when there was no clear successor to the throne of Elizabeth there would be many who would argue that they should be ruler. At best, it could be a difficult legal wrangle; at worst it could be war. Is it any wonder that Shakespeare, who was a practical man with a canny knowledge of politics, decided to keep the play a little quiet?”

He picked up a piece of paper. “Doctor Deane has mentioned that he will produce expert testimony to support his case, particularly Doctor Clerk-Maxwell, who is renowned for insisting, publicly, that Shakespeare did not write any of the plays, and textual analysts who have undoubtedly used stylometric computer analysis, the technical method du jour, to examine the part script he has. I gave some texts to my own experts, who work for the Defence Signals Department and volunteered their services for this exercise with the full co-operation of the Department of Defence. Using the best of cutting-edge techniques, they identified Winnie the Pooh as an early work of Shakespeare, and *Henry V* as undeniably a fake. I would suggest that the *stylometric computer analysis* is not infallible, and is only an indicator of a work’s authorship.” A few guffaws followed this announcement.

Adam paused to take a drink. “Dr Deane questions the provenance of the play. The unasked question is how it could have come into the hands of Mr Mayne, a man more renowned for selling cars than scholarship. Thereby hangs a tale, as another wise fool once said.” He picked up a piece of paper from the table. “Here is an excerpt from the bill of lading for the *Drika*, which left the port of Rotterdam on the sixteenth of November, 1624, bound for London: ‘small chest, property of Lord Wriothlesley, deceased, to be given into the hand of his son.’” He put the paper down. “Among the other items on the manifest were one hundred chests of sealing wax. Henry Wriothlesley, the Third Earl of Southampton, had died on the tenth of November, surviving his oldest son by a few days. The son

mentioned would be his younger son, who was visiting the family properties in Virginia at the time.” He looked around at the audience. “The *Drika* never made it to London. It was taken by a Spanish vessel before it entered the English channel.” He picked up another paper and flourished it at the rapt audience. “This is an extract from the log of the *Caragena*, a Spanish sloop of war, that says that the *Drika* was captured and dispatched with a prize crew to Cadiz, with the proposed course being through the North Sea and down past Ireland. It was November and a storm blew up, driving the ship, with its small crew, far off course. The storm drove it out into the Atlantic and down to the west of the Canary islands.” He pointed to more papers. “There are records of the crewmen who survived the fire that followed the storm and abandoned ship in the middle of the Atlantic, when the ship was last seen drifting south-west. Towards Cuba. We contend that it is not unlikely that a ship captain, charged with a confidential task, would attempt to hide one chest inside another. We further contend that it is likely that the wax melted to form a seal on the inner chest, which survived both the fire and the subsequent sinking of the vessel near Cuba. It was this very valuable ball of wax which was discovered by Mr Mayne, who has spent months verifying records to give a firm basis to this conjecture.” His voice rose. “We further contend that it is credible, nay, likely that Shakespeare would have given copies of his plays to his friend and patron, who outlived him by some eight years.”

“Thirty Seconds, Dr Bryant.”

Bryant raised his hand in a purely theatrical gesture. “But enough of this! I am aware that we are nearly over time, and that we could argue, expert against expert, authority against authority, endlessly digging through ever more obscure texts, and still not come to the conclusion that any theatregoer would come to: this is Shakespeare’s play. When Hamlet says ‘The play’s the thing’ he is not referring to words on paper, but to words and actions; a performance.” He swept his arm around in a gesture that included them all. “To put an end to wrangling, to leave the decision to a committee of the whole, I invite you all to the dress rehearsal of *Henry VII* the night after tomorrow.” He turned to Deane and held him steady in his gaze. “I particularly extend this invitation to Doctor Deane. While we are on opposite sides of this question, and while we have had differences before, I believe he is an honourable man, and I trust his integrity.” He raised his voice slightly, a subtle challenge in his tone. “Doctor Deane, will you accept this invitation? Will you judge this production on its merits when you have seen it as Shakespeare intended?”

“Oh, he is such a smooth bastard!” Madelyn whispered.

Deane had no choice. He rose to his feet and bowed to Bryant. “Doctor Bryant, I accept.”

“Then I’ll see you the night after tomorrow, at eight PM sharp.” He raised an eyebrow and looked at Ed. “I believe our stage manager is a stickler regarding the time the curtain goes up.”

Ed inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“If you will give your names to the gentlemen in the academic robes, they will ensure there is a ticket for you at the performance, and I hope, ladies and gentlemen, to see all of you there where we will present the best evidence of all, *Henry VII.*” With that, he sat down to resounding applause.

The Chancellor banged his gavel a few times to restore order. “Doctor Bryant,” he said as his eyes twinkled, “while the debate has been cut a little short by your action, I do like to see a good show. I’ll see you at the theatre. I now declare this debate adjourned until after the performance.” He banged the gavel once more, rose, bowed, and swept out.

There was quite a mob gathered in the front bar of the Forest Lodge Hotel. Most of the cast and crew were there, chattering away about the debate, what there had been of it, and they’d been joined by an academic rabble of students, lecturers and several of the newspaper journos who hadn’t rushed back to file their reports. Adam was at the head of a long table, flanked by Ed and Madelyn, with the rest of the inner circle spread down its length. The debate may have been adjourned, but the topic was still being hotly contested around them. Academics and students argued while journalists cadged drinks and surreptitiously took notes. Deane and his party were conspicuously absent.

“Why did you pull that stunt at the uni?” Ed asked after he’d got in a round of drinks for them all.

“Ta, mate.” Adam said. “Academic argument is thirsty work.” He took a long pull at his beer. “The reason I pulled what you clearly recognised was a stunt was that if the debate had gone on, he would have murdered us and thrown doubt on the validity of the manuscript. He had his case all prepared, and he had the backing of some very powerful people in England. I had to throw a case together in a hurry, and the one thing I could *not* do was the very thing that would prove our case; put the original documents up as evidence. Even photocopies wouldn’t have done, because there are all sorts of tests that have to be done on the paper and the binding in order to date the bloody things properly. Mayne did all that, but Deane wasn’t accepting the word of Mayne’s experts, because one was Japanese and one was Russian. They’re two men, by the way, for whom I have the uttermost respect, but Deane wanted either to view the manuscripts himself or to give them to one of his old-guard mates.”

“He’d already had that fragment examined, though.”

Adam nodded. “True, but that doesn’t count for anything on establishing provenance. Deane rightly said that it might not be Shakespeare at all.”

“But it is,” Madelyn interjected. “The part’s essential to the play as a whole.”

“And that’s true, too, but you can only know that if you read the entire play, and I wasn’t about to give him a copy, even a photocopy.”

“Why?” Ed asked.

“Because there are all sorts of tricks you could do with a photocopy. It doesn’t do anything in terms of establishing provenance, and Deane’s analysts could come up with some dodgy interpretation, then it would be his experts fighting my experts, and experts cost money. Deane has it, we don’t. He could have ground us down eventually, or given us such a drawn-out fight that the books, when they come out, would have had a few problems of their own. There’s the novelty value, and we’ll sell a load of them on that alone, but if they’re to be taken seriously, the provenance of the manuscript can’t be doubted. But it’s a catch-22: we can’t get the manuscript examined until the books have come out, and we can’t prove the books are reliable until the manuscript is examined. I’ve bought us a little time.”

Marco looked up from where he nursed a bottle of London Pride that he’d been delighted to see the pub stocked. “What can we do with the time, though?” he said.

“It gives me time to pull in a few favours, and if we can hold up the argument until the show opens, we’ll have some cash in hand,” Mayne answered for Bryant. He’d already finished his first beer and was heading to the bar for another round. “Who’s empty?”

“I’ll have another,” Adam Bryant said. He turned back to Marco. “The other thing is that Deane might just be convinced by the show. I wasn’t really joking when I talked about academic integrity. Deane’s a snotty prick, but he has, within his limits, done good work. He’s made mistakes, and he gets irritated when they’re pointed out, but nobody’s ever accused him of shonky work or of fudging results. If he’s convinced by the performance, he’ll say so, and then wait on the provenance. Most importantly, that will change him from wanting to *disprove* the manuscript to wanting to *prove* it. We all claim to be objective, but we all have hopes, too.” He finished his beer. “So it had better be a fucking good show.”

“It is a fucking good show,” Madelyn said.

Bryant accepted another beer from Mayne and held it high. “Well, then, ladies and gentlemen, I give you *Henry VII!*”

“And may all those actors remember their lines and not bump into the furniture,” Ed muttered quietly as he drank.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The schedule was a full music run in the morning, take a break and go into the tech run with music and all in the afternoon. Ed wasn't keen on it. He would rather have had a full day to tweak the tech run, because tech runs always, *always*, went overtime. The trouble was, the schedule was crowded, and there had to be a run with music, lights, the whole shebang, tomorrow early, then take a long break, get everyone back and get ready for the dress proper.

The music run and the tech run were going to be out of costume, which was a further complication. Linda was furiously cleaning, pressing and repairing costumes to get them ready for the dress, so they wouldn't be available to check the colours of the lights. Ed had compromised by asking everyone to wear t-shirts in the approximate colours of their costumes. But it was a compromise, and Ed *hated* compromises. It meant that Terry might have to adjust the lights tomorrow, just before the dress. One of the last things Ed wanted was for Terry to have to clamber about swapping gels just before the dress.

Ed gave a wry smile as he realised he was just getting the stress he always did before a show. Up to the dress it was Madelyn; from the dress on, it was his job to run the show, and he always wanted the show to run perfectly. They never did.

Arthur was shuffling his instruments down to the pit when he saw Ed in the wings. "Brown study, Ed?" Arthur was twenty years younger than Ed, but he used the archaisms of a nineteenth-century British gentleman.

"Not so much a brown study as a thoughtful prayer to all the gods of theatre that there won't be too many problems, and they'll all be fixable," Ed replied.

"I suspect that's where we musicians are lucky. We sit in our seats and blow or pluck or bang or whatever and, apart from broken strings or split reeds and other mechanical functions, if we've rehearsed properly and tuned our instruments correctly, it usually comes out all right." He ruminated for a moment. "Unless the trumpet player dies."

"What?"

"They have a habit of doing so. The poor sods get to do their solo, but they forget to stand up before they go into it. Standing up while blowing a trumpet hard is quite stressful, and they have heart attacks."

"Just tell your trumpet player to be careful, then."

“We don’t have one, as such, but if we did, we could always cover with the sackbut while the body was dragged away.” He smiled, winked, and trotted off humming to himself what sounded, to Ed’s incredulous ears, like AC/DCs *Dirty Deeds*.

“Jesus, I hope he’s not using that in the overture.”

OoO

Ed called the cues for the music run himself, with Bec sitting over his shoulder watching. He’d call cues and run the show, but he wanted her to be the assistant stage manager, so she could call cues if he had to go away for any reason. He’d already decided that he’d put her on the payroll as soon as they had some cash coming in. *Cash coming in*, he thought, *and that won’t happen unless the show worked. And the show won’t work unless I pay some attention to the music cues.*

They’d set up both a light cue and a headset for Arthur and the other musicians. He could take his cues from the stage, but Ed didn’t like to rely on that. He’d worked with musicians before, and they got distracted, so the band would have multiple cues. At least, Ed thought, he didn’t have to worry about microphones for the stage. They’d burned out in the fire and Terry hadn’t replaced them. This was going to be an old-school acoustic show.

But, he had to admit, it had run smoothly so far. Ed wasn’t a particularly superstitious man, unlike the actors, who had all, without exception, brought in their lucky frogs, voodoo dolls, lucky underwear and graven images, but he wished that there was something he could do apart from cross his fingers, touch wood and all the normal things you did to ward off bad luck. Just once he’d like there to be a god of stage managers, or a patron saint, that he could pray to, or make a sacrifice to, or whatever. Burn incense to, perhaps, the way that Claire Basset had a little brass Buddha on her table, with the draft wafting musky scent from incense sticks around the dressing room. Even Kevin Redmond, for Christ’s sake, had a small stuffed donkey of purple velvet underneath the dressing-room mirror.

“Okay,” Madelyn called as the notes of the motet that played out act four faded into silence. “Five minutes, everyone, then we’re back for the last act.” She had another of the NIDA people, a lanky boy with a clipboard in his hand, taking notes for her, and she took those from him and checked them, then handed them back and nodded. She called out “Everything okay backstage, Ed?”

Ed stuck his head out from behind the wing flat and said “No problems so far. Is the music coming in okay?”

“Yeah, fine. How are things in the pit, Arthur?”

“Fine,” he said, sticking his head up. “Apart from a few rat droppings and such, which we can have swept out, I assume?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Ed called. Theatres always had rats and mice, because they always had food crumbs somewhere. You trapped them, poisoned them and did everything you could to get rid of them, but they always came back. He’d have to see if he could get some baits laid when there was a break. In the meantime, he’d get Mick in to clean up the pit. Just now, the actors were filing into opening positions for act four.

Actors had St Genesius, but for the poor bloody backstage workers, there was nothing, so Ed knocked on the wooden brace of the flat, crossed his fingers and called the first cue for act four.

OoO

They broke for lunch after Madelyn had given the notes from the run. “It’s looking good, Ed,” she said to him as she walked away. Yes, Ed thought, but you’re seeing it with different eyes, from twelve rows back. For all your hard-arse nature, you *want* it to look good this close to opening. He went to find Marco and took him up to the bio box to have a conference with Terry.

“Betty’s being a good girl,” he said, stroking the lighting board fondly. “Smooth as silk.”

“We’ll need to check timing on the fades now that we know the timing for the music. It was a little rough in the run,” Ed said.

“Yeah, I can fudge it a little by doing it by ear, but the timing’s always going to be a bit flabby. Musicians never play the same twice in a row, and these ones don’t even have a rhythm section.”

“Okay, but some of the scene changes need to be worked on, as well.” He looked down at the notes Madelyn had given him. “She wants to re-set a couple of lights for monologues, and she says all the ghost scenes are too bright.”

“Yeah, well she can call the levels during the tech run.”

“How did it look from up here?”

“There are a couple of hot spots that I can iron out before the run, and there’s a bastard of a shadow being thrown by one of the backlights during Roland’s big soliloquy in act two. I think a rope’s come loose somewhere in front of the light. I’ll get up and check it.”

“Marco? How was it for you?”

“Too dull stage left in the court scenes. What gels are in for that?”

Terry checked the lighting plot. “Couple of mid-ambers and a face.”

“Can we put another light in, or change the gels, or just bring the lights up a bit?”

Ed looked around as Terry and Marco got into a technical discussion about the best way to fix the problem. He liked the way Terry worked; clean and simple. Suddenly, he saw something odd.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Terry looked to where he was pointing and laughed. “It’s my new mojo,” he said. “I figured I needed one for this show, so I went down to the markets and got that.”

That was a tiny toy robot, about four inches high that looked like something out of an old *Amazing* cover. Terry walked over to where it stood on a shelf and turned it around. A key stuck out of its back. “It winds up,” he said, and did so. With a grating sound of poorly cut gears meshing, the robot’s legs and arms began to perform a mechanical march. They all stared at it until it wound down. “I figure if the robot works, the show will go well.”

“What will happen if it doesn’t?”

Terry shrugged. “I don’t know. So far, it’s worked.”

Marco gave a guffaw. “Bleedin’ ‘ell. Was that the best you could do?”

“It was a cheap price to pay for some sort of security. Don’t tell me you haven’t got a lucky charm.”

Marco looked a little embarrassed. “Well, yeah, there’s me folio.”

“That ratty plastic thing you carry your sketches in?” Ed said.

“Yeah. It’s the first one I ever bought, and I got me first job straight after, an’ I always thought it was because I looked real professional carryin’ stuff in that portfolio, like a real artist.” He laughed. “It’s a bloody tatty old thing, I know, but it’s been with me on every job since.”

“What’s your mojo, Ed?” Terry said. “What’s your lucky charm?”

“I was just thinking about that a while back. Haven’t got one.”

They both stared at him.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve never had one.”

“Jesus, mate,” Marco said. “I reckon you’d better go shopping tonight. If you ever needed a mojo, you need one for this show.”

“Yes, okay, I’ll get something before the show goes up. Okay? But right now, we have to work out these lighting questions before the run.”

OoO

True to expectations, the tech run went overtime. They’d budgeted five hours for it, breaking at ten-thirty, but it was after midnight when the final fade-out from the curtain call happened. There weren’t any *big* problems, but a plethora of small ones, partly caused by the rushed construction of the new stage and set, partly caused by Ed, Marco and Madelyn’s demands for perfection. “If it’s sloppy to start with,” Ed said when Barry was fretting about how long it was taking, “it will get sloppier. If it starts off perfect, you can bring it back to perfect during the run. You can’t get it there if it’s never been there.”

The cast had all done it before, and were stoic about it. Arthur and the musicians seemed to take it in their stride. Even Marco’s dog Bruno, who now seemed to be under the constant veterinary care of Tess, who, in turn, seemed to be under the constant controlled lechery and care of Leon, seemed to be treating the whole thing with an unusual degree of canine patience.

After the final bow, while the cast were still assembled on the stage, Ed called for the lights to go back up on stage and in the house, then stood up and looked at the cast. He turned to Madelyn, who knew what was coming, and got a nod, which he returned. “Okay,” he said. “We’ve got a show, I think, and tomorrow we’ve got two runs. The first is a final costume run with lights and sound and all bells and whistles. Dr Vale will be giving you notes on that, checking costumes and such, and we’ll iron out any lingering technical problems, although I think we’ve got most of them solved, now.” He took a deep breath and raised his voice a little. “The second run tomorrow is the dress rehearsal. It was going to be a closed dress, but now there’ll be two or three hundred in the audience, and they will not all be delighted to be here.” He looked hard at them. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s a performance, and I will run it as a performance.”

He held up a hand and ticked off the points on his fingers. “Everybody will be here for the thirty-minute call. Everybody; no exceptions. Everybody will be in costume and make-up, apart from last-minute touches, by the five-minute call. When I call beginners, about two minutes before we go up, every single beginner will move to the wings, ready to go.” His look became almost a glare. “This show *will* go up on time, tomorrow night and every performance thereafter, so you’d better synchronise your watches with mine. If you’re not ready to go on, that curtain will still rise. If you’re sick, tell me if you can’t go on, as early as possible.” He put his hands down and shrugged. “I’m not going to tell you not to drink before a show, because some of you will, even though I think it’s unprofessional. I know some people need a touch of Dutch courage, or a libation to the gods or

whatever you want to call it, before they go on. Your call. If you're too drunk to go on, tell me, because if you don't I'll let you fall over your own feet, forget your lines and generally make a fool of yourself in public. I am *not* responsible for your performance; you are. I'm also not responsible for your reputation."

He looked around at Madelyn, Marco and the others in the production team, then back to the cast and musicians. "We've got a bloody great show here. Dr Vale, Marco, and everybody else in the production team have worked their arses off to get you to this point, and I promise you that the crew will work just as hard to make it easy for you to do your performance. There'll be problems, because every show has a problem now and again, but we'll take care of them. We'll do our part, you do yours, and we can all get pissed together after the opening." He pushed his hands at them, shooing them away. "Now go home, get a good night's sleep. Ten o'clock call tomorrow."

They shuffled off, murmuring quietly as they did.

"Well, that's that," Ed said.

Madelyn got up and, much to Ed's surprise, hugged him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You did good," she said.

"Yeah mate," Marco said, shaking him by the hand, "you gave 'em a little dose of reality. Now, go and get a good night's sleep yourself."

"I will. Terry," he called out, "bring the lights down and kill the board. We're off for the night. And," he called out to Bec and the rest of the crew who were doing a final tidy, "thank you all. Go home, rest and get here by nine for the set-up."

There was a chorus of assent from the crew as they finished and they filed away to the wings.

"Well," Ed breathed to himself as he went to get Linda from backstage, "we're as ready as we're going to be."

0o0

As they lay in bed that night, Ed said "Linda, do you have a mojo?"

She raised herself up onto one elbow and said "What?"

"You know, a mojo, a lucky charm or something."

She regarded him quizzically. "How long have we been living together?"

"Twelve years, about."

“And how many shows have we worked on?”

“God, I don’t know. Dozens. “

“And you have never, ever asked me about this before.”

“Well, no, but it came up in conversation today, and everybody seems to have some little thing, like Henry has a special teacup, and Terry went out and bought a little toy robot and . . .” he ran down as she stared at him.

“And Claire has a little bowl that she puts one red rose into, Greg’s got a little LaLique crystal statuette, even Kevin has a stuffed donkey that came from the set of his mother’s first film.”

“Well, do you?”

The bedclothes rustled as she got up and moved to the dressing table. She pulled open a drawer, opened a box and took something out, then came back to the bed and stood over it. “And never, in all our years and shows, have you noticed me wearing this?” She dangled a small gold locket from her hand.

He shook his head.

“You know,” she said as she put the locket around her neck, “for someone who is as punctilious as you are, pays such attention to detail and notices every tiny little thing on a set, you have a peculiar form of domestic blindness.” She got onto the bed and leaned over him, the locket dangling in front of her breasts in her nightie. “I have worn this locket on the first night of every show I’ve ever done. You have seen it at least thirty or forty times. I never wear it on any other occasion.”

“You’re wearing it now.”

“Yes, but I’ll take it off again in a moment. I’ll put it back on when we go to the theatre tomorrow.”

Ed thought for a moment. “What’s inside it?”

She took it in her hand and gazed at it thoughtfully. “Inside this,” she said, “is a tiny piece of peach-coloured rayon. I cut it from a costume I sewed for the very first job I got after college. I keep it to remind me, and for luck.”

“So you believe in luck?”

“Who doesn’t? But if it exists or not, a little bit of belief never hurt anyone.” She got up and returned the locket to its box, then came back to bed and snuggled up to him.

Ed cuddled her and stroked her hair. "I guess I'd better get a lucky charm tomorrow, then," he said.

"Nah," she replied, and kissed him. "You've got me."

0o0

The theatre was quiet in the early morning. Even the tiny noises of people going about their business the chatter of conversation, the hum of the lights, the thousand tiny little creaks and bumps as people moved around, were absent. The cast weren't there yet, nor were most of the crew, but Bec had come in early to check props. She was the keenest of the NIDA people, by far. While she was out back at the props table, Linda was putting costumes in the dressing rooms and Ed moved purposefully around the scaffolding of the stage, checking every bolt, every clamp and every board. He'd checked them the day before, and he'd check them again before the dress proper and before every show thereafter. He'd also check the batteries in the intercom, the ropes and cables, and that the curtain rose and fell properly. There were a thousand small things that had to be done to make sure the show ran properly. Some he could delegate to those he trusted; Linda with the costumes and Bec with the props. Some were the purview of others, such as Terry with the lights and Mick with the machinery, but he'd check with them before every show as well, even though he knew that Terry would rather nail his dick to a wall than let a show go up with dodgy lights, and that Mick loved his machines as if they were his children. Some stage managers left it to their assistants to check everything, or just walked in and assumed everything would work. Ed treated the theatre the way he'd treated an engine room in the navy; for everything to work, everything had to be checked and taken care of, all the time. Then things ran sweetly.

Lights started coming up and going down, one at a time. Ed pressed the intercom button. "You're in early, Terry," he said.

"Couldn't sleep, and I figured I may as well come in and check Betty. She looks good, though. You do anything about the rats, yet?"

"Called an exterminator and he's going to come in early next week and lay some baits. Why?"

"There were some droppings up here. They're getting in somewhere, mate."

"Bugger. I'll see if I can get him to come in today, after the cleaners come in between shows."

Bloody rats, Ed thought. He didn't have the time to muck about with this, but he called the exterminator anyway, and made the arrangements. It seemed strange that the rats had appeared suddenly, like this, but it might be because there were people around now, and people left food and crumbs and wrappers everywhere. The cleaners would get rid of everything in the house today, but

they couldn't get backstage until Sunday. We'll just have to make sure we clean up really well after each performance, he thought.

After he was satisfied with the scaffolding, he went backstage to Bec and the props table. She'd just finished checking off each item on the list and they were laid out neatly in the order in which they'd be required. A few larger props were on a separate table. "Everything alright, Bec?" Ed asked.

"Yeah, fine." She looked up at him and grinned. "I'm just really excited. This is my first professional show." She pointed to her hair. There was a green ribbon tying it back into a ponytail. "I'm wearing my lucky ribbon."

Jesus, Ed thought, *I'm surrounded by them*. "Well that's good," he said. "Have you got the list for the personal props?"

She passed him a list and pointed to a basket by the side of the table. "They're all in there. I was going to go down and give them out."

"Pass them over. I'll put them on the dressing tables."

He made his way down to the dressing rooms, and started putting the personal props in place. A noise in the men's dressing room caught his attention and he thought it might be Linda, until he saw her pass by and asked her what the noise was.

"Leon. He's in early."

"Leon? He never gets in early."

"He has today."

Ed walked into the men's dressing room to see Leon lacing himself into his treads for his part as guard. His helmet was on a wig-stand and his spear was propped against the wall with a black and pink garter hanging from it. *Chris, another one*, Ed thought. Leon grinned at Ed and said "G'day."

Ed started to hand out Leon's personal props and said "You're in early."

"Yeah, well, I woke up early. Bloody lovely day, isn't it?"

As Ed had come in it had been cold, cloudy and a light drizzles had been falling. "Only if you're a masochist," he said.

Leon winked at him. "Look on the bright side, mate."

Ed stared at him. "What's happened, Leon?" he asked.

“Why?”

Ed put down the last of the props, a small scent bottle, and said “I’ve worked with you before. You’re never this chirpy before a dress. You never get in early and you’re just not a morning person. You usually prowl around and look gloomy until you’ve had your third cup of coffee.”

Leon looked sheepish. “I reckon I might be in love, mate.”

Ed put the basket down. “Tess?”

“Yeah.”

Ed looked hard at him. “She’s a nice girl. Don’t fuck her around.”

Leon shook his head. “It’s not like that, not this time.” He raised a hand in a frustrated gesture. “I mean, she’s the only woman who’s ever seen through all my bullshit, and laughed at me for it, and still liked me. She knows what I am, and she still thinks I’m a good guy. She really does.” He shook his head and gave a quiet laugh, then said, very softly, “She thinks I’m worthwhile. How about that?”

Ed stopped what he was doing and looked at him “You’ve always been worthwhile, mate. You could have been a truly great actor, if you hadn’t chased skirt all the time. Maybe you still could be.”

“Yeah, well, I think I’d like to find out. And I think I’d like Tess to be along when I do.”

“I hope you do find out, I really do. And I hope it works out with Tess.”

“It’s been good so far.”

“Work to keep it that way, eh?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Marco was furious. "There's a fuckin' hole been chewed in one of the scrims. It's bleedin' happened since last night."

Ed put his hands up and made patting gestures to try to quiet him down. "Can it be fixed before the dress?"

Marco took a deep breath and pulled himself together. "Yeah, I'll get onto it now, but it's just as bloody well that I was checkin' some of the shadows with Terry. There would 'ave been this fuckin' glowin' spot on the wall like something out of fuckin' Dr Who. How the bloody hell did it happen?"

"There have been some rats around. The exterminator's coming in between shows."

"Yeah, but why would they chew the fuckin' scrim?"

Marco went away grumbling to himself and Ed turned to Bec at the props table. "Have you seen any rats?"

"No. Ask Mick; they might be down under the stage."

Ed went downstairs and asked Mick the same question.

"No, I haven't seen anything but some droppings," Mick answered. "There are always one or two rats around, but the cleaners would be the people to ask. They'd see all the droppings and stuff."

"I'll ask them when they get in after the show, but it's been a while since they've been in, they might not have seen anything."

Mick stared at him. "They were in last night. And three nights before that."

"What?"

"Yeah, McQuade cleaners. Said Mayne had hired them. Went right through the place."

"Shit! If he did, he didn't tell me. I'll go and check with him. We might be double booked."

Mayne was up in the office with Barry and Adam, and they were chuckling about something. Mayne beckoned Ed inside and said "I think we might have put a slight spoke in Deane's wheel."

"How so?" Ed asked, taking a seat.

Adam said "You remember how he slagged off at my expert assessors not having English as their first language?"

Ed Nodded.

“Well,” Mayne said, “I invited the Russian and the Japanese ambassadors and their cultural attaches, and they’ve both accepted. They’d heard about what Deane said in the debate, and they were very pleased to accept my invitation. I’m seating the Russians on his left and the Japanese on his right.”

Ed smiled. “That should be interesting. But there’s something else.” He explained about the cleaners.

“I thought the place was looking tidy,” Mayne said, “but I didn’t hire them. Barry?”

Barry shook his head.

“Well, somebody did. Mick said they’ve been here twice.”

“If they turn up again get their number, and I’ll make enquiries. We’ve got that other mob coming in during the break.”

“Crithalls,” Barry said.

“Yes. They used to clean offices for me when I was a businessman and had offices. Now I’m an entrepreneur, and they clean my theatre.”

Ed began to say, “There’s something bloody strange about these two cleaners . . .” but was interrupted by an enraged scream came from below stage.

“Excuse me,” Ed said, and ran down the stairs.

Linda was swearing and cursing in the female dressing-room. “Look at this!” she said, holding a pale blue dress to Ed’s view. “There’s shit on it! There’s been a rat in here and it’s shat on my fucking dress. I’ll have to clean this now, and it’ll stink of cleaning fluid, that’s if I can get the fucking stain off in time. Otherwise one of the ladies in fucking waiting’s going to go on in bloody knickers and bra. Bastards!”

The bus with the cast had arrived and they started to file in. “What was that about?” Sam Hackney, who played John Morton, asked from the men’s dressing room as he put his bag down and started to undress.

“A rat shat on one of the dresses. Left a stain.”

“Jesus. I’d better check my costumes.”

“That’s a thought. Pass the word to the boys, will you, and I’ll tell the girls.” He waited until Nicole Arrakidis, playing Catherine, came in and gave her the warning, asking her to tell all the others.

“Sure,” she said, “although they should be pretty used to rats around the theatre.” She blew him a kiss. “Not you, of course, but there are a few who’ll turn up on opening night. Stage door Johnnies of the old school.”

“I’m sure you can handle them,” Ed said with a smile.

She ran a hand through her glorious red hair and winked at him. “Who says I want to? A little touch of Johnny in the night is sometimes just what a girl needs for relieving her tension. Now go away unless you want to perve at my tits.”

“Seen ‘em last show we did,” Ed said, and ducked as she pretended to throw something at him.

“I’ll tell Linda you said that.”

“Jesus, don’t. She’s in a bad enough mood already,” Ed laughed as he went out the door and shut it behind him.

Nicci wasn’t really flirting with him. A lot of them got like this just before a show. It was nerves, pure and simple. Some reacted by being playful and flirtatious, some got withdrawn and grumpy, some just had to have a drink or a cigarette, but the chatter in the dressing-rooms always got a little louder and shriller close to opening. It was the culmination, the presentation; the show. Ed had to admit that it affected him, too, but he was fortunate that he had a lot to do, and if he didn’t he could make busy-work for himself. The cast didn’t have that luxury. The rehearsals were over, they were in costume and they had to go on. Win lose or draw, it all hit the fan tomorrow night. Tonight was bloody important for the academics but it would just be a taste test compared to the reaction of the first night house. The critics would be in, and they wouldn’t care about provenance, they’d care about what they saw on stage.

“Ah, there you are, Ed.” Henry Stringfellow came out of his dressing-room holding a small electric jug. “I have a little problem, with which I hope you can help.” He was half in costume, tights and a shirt with tissues tucked in all around the neck to save it from the make-up he was about to put on. He held up the jug and showed it to Ed. “I was just going to get some water for my pre-show cuppa and I found sabotage.” The jug’s cord ended in a ragged tear with the plug dangling half-off. “Would it be possible to get it fixed, or to get the loan of another?”

“Bloody rats,” Ed said, staring at the cord. “That bloody exterminator can’t get here fast enough.” He took it from Henry. “I’ll go up to the bio box. Terry has enough spares to wire up a factory up there. I’m sure he can put a new plug on. Back in a jiff.”

“No real hurry, old boy. It’s not even the half-hour yet.”

Ed checked his watch as he hurried up to the bio box. Henry was right; it was a little after ten and the rehearsal wasn't until eleven. He seemed to feel rushed, for some reason, as though a lot of things were going wrong, but it was really only the problem with the rats. He saw the band setting up in the pit. Maybe Arthur and his merry men could charm them away. Something would have to be done soon.

Terry was listening to music from his iPhone when Ed got to the bio box. He took the buds from his ears and asked "What's up?"

Ed explained, and also explained about the general rat problem. "You know," Terry said as he took the jug from Ed's hands and selected a plug from his stock of spares, "I used to share a house with some people in Glebe, and we had a rat problem." He cut the plug from the cord and started to strip the wires. "Nothing we did worked. We set traps, laid baits, even bought a cat. The cat ate one of the baits and nearly died." He put the new plug on the cord and began to screw the wires in. "But one night I was in bed, it was really late, must have been about two in the morning, and I heard a weird sound coming from the kitchen. The kitchen was downstairs, and the bedrooms were upstairs. I went to my door and listened and, sure enough, there was an erratic noise coming from the kitchen." He put the plug back together and handed the jug back to Ed. "The door opposite opened and one of the other people in the house, Samantha, stuck her head out. She was carrying a torch. She looked at me and mouthed 'Burglars,' and produced a hammer from behind her. We crept down the stairs, and we could see what looked like the intermittent light of a torch coming from the kitchen, and these zapping sounds. We burst in through the door, and there was this mad bastard Peter Hall sitting in the kitchen with an air rifle and a torch, spotlighting rats." He laughed. "He'd got three of the buggers, and had this maniacal gleam in his eye, as if he was the great white hunter. Maybe that's what we need to do; put Mick downstairs with a shotgun."

"Yeah, well I'll take that up with the exterminator when he comes in. Thanks for the jug, mate."

"You're welcome."

"Everything okay up here?"

"Not a problem in the world. Me and Julian have everything under control."

"Julian?"

Terry pointed at the little robot.

"Ah," Ed said, and thought to himself, as he walked away, that even the sanest, most stable and logical of people, like Terry, went a little strange just before opening. He touched wood and hoped the same thing wouldn't happen to him.

He passed the jug back to Henry, who gave him his thanks, went over to wardrobe and asked if Linda needed any help, but she didn't. She'd managed to get the stain out and was drying the skirt with a hair-dryer. He went out into the auditorium and saw that Madelyn and Marco were setting up to watch the show from different angles. She was stage right and he was stage left. He went backstage and checked with Bec one more time, went down into the pit and made sure that Arthur and the boys were set up and okay. They were tuning up in a harmonious racket.

And that was it. There was a moment for him to be still, when he'd done everything he could for the moment, and to do anything more would be distracting and disturbing. He listened, instead, to the notes from the instruments, the clatter from feet walking on the stage above and the chatter and laughter from the dressing rooms. It was a sound that made him happy, as if it was the real overture to the performance, the one that the audience never heard. Then his mobile 'phone buzzed in his pocket and he took it out. It was the alarm he'd set for the thirty-minute call.

"Okay," he called out, moving around the dressing rooms and up to the backstage. "Thirty minutes, everybody. This is the half-hour call." He called Terry on the intercom and told him, receiving two soft squawks of static as Terry pressed the talk button in reply.

It is always a pause between the thirty and the five. If you've done your job right, Ed thought, there should be nothing to do apart from help people zip up costumes and find lost mascara brushes. Later on would come filling wine bottle and flagons with dilute Coke for red wine, and even more dilute Coke for white wine. There would be the shuffle in and out; the calling of beginners for each act, checking cues and calling cues, but there is always a pause, where the world seems to hold its breath, because the first act doesn't start on stage, but backstage where all the visions wait to make their appearance in the dream. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," he murmured as he stood in the wings. Shakespeare knew about actors, but stage crew had their parts to play too. Maybe it was different back in Will's day; maybe the actors doubled in brass, so to speak. Not now. "Terry, are the presets done?" he said into the intercom, and cursed himself for doing so. Terry would have done the presets as soon as he came in, if not before leaving last night. As the affirmative double click came through, he wiped his hands on his jeans and gave Bec the nod for the five minute call. He shouldn't be so nervous. They were ready. He took a deep breath and gave Arthur the cue for the overture on the red light. Two more minutes and the beginners were up in the wings, Mick was on the curtain with a lanky NIDA student, and Ed pressed the button for Arthur to begin the overture. As the music wound up from the pit, he made a final check of the stage. In the dim light, the soft drapings of the set were sensuous curves that led the eye here and there to the decorations Marco had scattered over the headboards of the fixed flats. Kevin was in the centre right of the stage, lounging against a pillar that could be swung away on a cable. He had a set stare on his face that Ed hoped would turn into the required insouciant grin when the curtain went up. His lips were moving,

probably running through his first lines. Greg was in the wings stage left, looking spiffy in his Stanley costume, and he tipped Ed a wink as he saw him looking. Another two minutes and Ed gave Mick the nod for the curtain as the overture dwindled, and whispered “Lighting cue one, go” into the intercom.

As the lights came up Greg walked onto the stage, and said “Well met, Sir Roland. Is the King about?”

Kevin stopped lounging on the pillar and came forward to give Greg a bow that had the merest hint of superciliousness in it and replied “He is, my lord. He keeps his court within,” and Ed breathed a sigh of relief.

And the run began.

And stopped midway through act two, when all the lights went out.

Madelyn screamed out “What the *fuck* is happening?”

Ed got on the intercom to Terry. “What’s happened? How long until we’ve got lights?”

Terry came back. “The fucking fuses have blown. I’m checking them now, but it looks like something has shorted out the main distribution board.”

“How long?”

“I can replace the fuses, but there’s no power coming up into Betty or the plugboard. I’ll have to check the distributor panel to find out what caused the short.”

“Okay, get on it.” *Fuck* Ed thought. “Bec,” he yelled, “turn on the workers from here.” Thankfully, the workers flickered into life immediately, revealing the bewildered actors on stage and a furious Madelyn heading towards it.

“Ed,” she screamed, “what the *fuck* is going on?”

Ed walked out on stage and called down to her “There was a short circuit somewhere that blew all the fuses. Terry’s onto it now, but he has to see what caused the short, otherwise the lights might just blow again.”

Madelyn stamped back to her seat, threw her script onto it and yelled “What is it with this fucking country? It doesn’t matter what the theatre is, they’re all crap! Jesus Christ; I should have known better than to do a show in this fucking banana republic!”

Marco hurried over to her and started to calm her down. After a few minutes she said, in a slightly more normal tone of voice, “Okay, go back to the green room and wait until they’ve got the lights up

again. We'll take it from the top of scene four when they can get the fucking hamsters pedalling again."

Ed got rid of his headset and then ran down the stairs to the auditorium and up to the bio box. Terry met him at the base of the stairs to the box. "You'd better come and see this," he said.

The main distribution panel was in a separate locker beneath the bio box itself, and Terry had pulled the door open. "That's what cause the short," he said and pointed to a charred mass just below the panel. It was the remains of a rat. "It tried to eat the insulation and shorted out the panel. That blew all the fuses."

"How the fuck did it get in?"

Terry pointed to a series of holes in the wall above the panel. "Ventilation holes. It got in through them."

"Why in the name of Christ would it do that?"

Terry just shrugged.

"How long to fix it?"

"The fuses I can replace in about fifteen minutes, but I'm going to have to re-wire this thing, and that's going to take a couple of hours, at least. The wiring's totally fried. Then I'll have to check all the lamps to see if they've been affected. Three hours, all up."

"Madelyn is *not* going to be happy."

"Yeah, well, you could tell her that it's better for it to happen now than during the dress."

"I'm not sure that will console her."

A cigarette and a coffee and Marco's blandishments had calmed Madelyn to the point that she only cursed for a few minutes. She drained her coffee, threw the foam cup at the stage and said "Okay, it's still only just noon. We'll run it without lights, just use the workers and hope that they don't blow. You're sure that the lights will work tonight?"

Ed assured her they would, crossing his fingers and silently invoking any gods that were listening.

"Yeah, okay. Let's get the fucking cast back on stage. Run it from the entrance, beginning scene four."

Ed got the cast in position and cued the music. There were a few fumbles at the beginning, but the cast soon got back into it, they held together, remembered their lines and moves. Arthur and the band

kept up brilliantly. The set changes went smoothly and even under the harsh white of the fluorescent workers the set was a pastel masterpiece. The actors looked odd in their stage make-up, but their costumes were gorgeous. They made it through to the end of act three without anything else happening, and Madelyn called out to take thirty. Ed walked back out into the auditorium to check how Terry was going.

“About another hour for this mess,” Terry said from a nest of wiring, “and then thirty to check everything. I’ve changed the fuses already. There was some sort of blue stain on his hand.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t know. There’s all sorts of stuff can come out of this old wiring.” He looked up quizzically. “Rat blood’s red, right?”

Ed assured him it was and left him to his work.

Backstage, Bec and the other NIDA people were busy setting up for act four, the cast were grabbing quick drinks or a bite to eat from the sandwiches that had been sent to the green room by the ever-thoughtful Barry, Linda was checking costumes and Tess was just coming in from outside, where she’d been giving Bruno a piddle break. “I hear congratulations are in order,” she said as Bruno started to sniff Ed’s crotch and lick his knee.

“What?” Ed’s head was filled with details of lighting and set-changes, rats and fuses.

“You and Linda. Marriage. Wedding. After the show starts its run.”

“Oh. Thanks.” He was puzzled. “Who told you?”

“Marco.”

“Who the bloody hell told him?”

“I think it might have been one of several people. I don’t think it’s been a secret for a while.” She smiled brilliantly. “I’m happy for you both. You’re good people.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“What do you think of Leon?”

Oh, shit, Ed thought. This is probably not the best of times to ask me, not in the middle of a run that’s had the lights blow.

“I mean, you’ve known him for a while, haven’t you.”

Yeah, I've known him as a talented actor who could never get it all together in the face of his attraction to yet another pretty woman, Ed thought. I've known him to be tossed off a show when he fucked the director's wife on a couch in the green room while act two was on. I've known him to have three women on a string at the same time, and to be totally puzzled when that caused a bit of a ruckus.

"A bit over fifteen years," he said, "and I've never quite been able to work the bastard out."

She smiled again. "I think he just needed someone who knew how to work with animals. Come on, Bruno; stop smelling his donger and let's go. You're on in a minute." She waved as she led Bruno away to the wings.

Ed went down to wardrobe, where Linda was brushing lint off a couple of coats. "I don't know why I'm doing this," she said. "It shows up under stage lights, but won't under the workers. Habit, I suppose."

Ed grabbed her and gave her a quick kiss. "I think that's one of the reasons I love you; you're a great wardrobe mistress."

She grinned at him and pulled away. "Ta, but I've got work to do, and there's only ten minutes until the show goes up for act four.

"Listen, Ed said, "did you tell Marco about us getting married?"

"No. Why?"

Ed explained.

"The only person I told was Henry, and I swore him to silence." She pointed to a pile of design books on a stool in the corner. "He caught me leafing through the wedding dress designs in one of those, and browbeat me until I told him. That bugger," she laughed, "he told me he'd keep it quiet."

"Yeah, well the secret's out now."

"You worried? Changed your mind."

Ed gave her a quick cuddle. "That's the only thing I'm still certain of. As soon as this show gets running properly, we'll set a date. The sooner the better."

"Well, you'd better get out there and get it running, cowboy. It's just about the five."

He blew her a kiss and got all the starters for act four in place. He checked with Madelyn and she gave him a nod from behind her cigarette, and act four began.

Thankfully, nothing went wrong for the rest of the run. The last chords of Arthur's music died away and the cast came back on stage for the bows, the way they'd been organised last night at the tech run. They took their cue from Henry, in the centre of the line, took two bows to the applause of a few hands and then filed offstage.

Ed finished clapping and said to them "Okay, seven-thirty is the call, but if you want to get here earlier, don't feel you have to stay away. If the door's closed, knock; there'll be somebody here to let you in."

They waved to acknowledge him and went down to take off make-up and costume before going out to relax and eat and prepare, each in their own way, for tonight. Ed became aware of a tiny clapping sound coming from the back of the hall and stuck his head out to see what was going on. In the dim light he could see a short, tubby man in overalls beating his hands together enthusiastically while Madelyn and Marco stared at him.

Ed walked to down centre stage and called out "Hello? Who's that?"

The man stopped his applause and walked a little way down the aisle. "That was the best bloody thing I've ever seen. Brought tears to my eyes," he called out.

"Who are you?"

"Dan Simmons. I'm the exterminator you called. I got in a bit early and that bloke out the front let me in and I watched the last half-hour of the show. You're on a winner there, mate."

"Thanks for your critical appreciation," Madelyn yelled. "Now can you get down here and do something about these fucking rats?"

Ed hurried down while Marco shuffled Madelyn away and down to the bar. He stuck out his hand and the exterminator shook it. "Ed Cahill, stage manager," he said. "Come on out front and I'll show you where they've done the most damage."

He guided Simmons to the panel where Terry still worked. Terry looked up and said "I've nearly got it all sorted out now. Another fifteen minutes testing the connections here and I'll go up and start checking the lights."

Simmons looked at Terry's hands, which still had the blue stain on them. "Where'd you get that, son?"

"It was on the wiring. Don't know what it is."

"I do. It's rat-attractant. You use it in traps to make the rats come after them." He looked over at Ed. "Have you made any enemies lately, mate? Because that's the cause of your rat problem, right there."

"Shit!" Ed immediately thought of Little Jimmy McHenry, and the mysterious cleaners who'd appeared out of nowhere. "Can you get rid of it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, easily. It just wipes off and a bit of ammonia or disinfectant on a rag will get rid of the scent. We'll have to find out where it is, though. Have the little beasts been anywhere else?"

"Backstage."

"Okay, well I'll get me kit and wipe this mess down to start with, and then we can start looking for other bits." He shook his head. "It's good stuff. You can buy it in hardware stores and it lasts for days. Wears out, eventually."

"How long will it take you to get rid of it?"

"Depends on how much has been put around. I'll start searching for traces out from where the rats have been."

He hustled out the front doors while Terry stared down at his hands. "Rat attractant, eh?"

"Little bloody Jimmy, I wager. Those bloody fake cleaners." He made fists out of his hands and held them up beside his head in frustration, as if he'd like to punch someone but had no target. "Look," he said, "the real cleaners will be arriving any minute. Let them know what's going on with this stuff and I'll get Simmons to have a talk with them. They can check what they clean and wipe any of this stuff off if they find it. A thorough cleaning should get rid of most of it and I'll help all the backstage staff with the cleaning back there. We'll get all hands on it and we should be able to get it done before the cast get back. I'm going back to the dressing rooms. Tell Simmons how to get there."

Terry nodded his assent and Ed hurried away. He went up to the office to find that Mayne and Barry were still there, and he informed them quickly of what the situation was. They were still cursing and swearing as he went down to the dressing rooms.

Simmons arrived a few minutes later and Ed showed him where the dress had hung and where the cord had been chewed. Simmons fiddled around for a few minutes, looking under dressing tables and in corners, then held up a little aluminium foil pie dish. There was a pool of blue paste in the middle of it, surrounded by grains of rice. "That's one," he said. "Every rat in the district would have headed for this. But we're in luck," he dumped it into a black garbage bag he took from his case. "If they've done this all through, it will be easy to get rid of." He checked the other dressing rooms and found the same sort of feast for rats in each one, hidden under benches and in dim corners. By that time the

cleaners had arrived, and Ed sent Simmons off to have a word with them before checking the rest of the backstage area.

Christ, he thought, some bloody stage manager I am. I knew something was off with those fake cleaners, but I didn't know what. Fuck!

Ed caught up with Linda as she came back from getting some lunch. She had a falafel roll that smelled heavenly, and Ed realised that he hadn't had anything since a very early breakfast. He told her what had happened and asked if she always locked the wardrobe.

"Yes," she said. "I don't want anyone going in there."

"I'll get Simmons to check it, anyway. Look, as soon as Bec and the others get back, can you organise them into a cleaning party? Tell them to look out for blue paste, either on little plates or smeared over things. I'll go and check with the cleaners and then come back here to help them."

"Okay, but take a break and get some lunch. Catch a nap, if you can; you need to be on deck tonight."

"I will, soon. I need coffee like a junkie needs a hit." He waved to her as he raced out to the auditorium. The cleaners were going through every aisle and seat with cleaning cloths, under the direction of Simmons.

"What's happening?" Ed asked.

Dan Simmons looked over to him and nodded towards the cleaners. "I've told them what's going on, so they're going to wipe off and search all the seats before they clean and vacuum. It will take them longer, but that way we're sure to get all of this rat stuff."

"Great. Dan, can you get backstage and search more? Show the crew what to look for and where. I'll be back to help in a minute."

Terry was just finishing up and closing the panel when Ed found him. "Do you need anyone to check the lights from the stage?" he asked.

"Yeah; it would save me time. They can stay on the intercom while I bring the lights up and down and call out if any don't come up, or look wonky."

"Okay, I'll arrange it."

The aisle seemed to be getting longer each time Ed ran it, but he got backstage and grabbed Stan to work with Terry. Simmons was with Linda in wardrobe, but he shook his head when Ed asked him if

there was any sign of rats. “No, mate, but you’d better check everywhere. Rats are messy buggers, and they might have got some on their coats and wiped it off somewhere else.”

“Shit, that’s probably what happened to Henry’s jug cord and Marco’s scrim.”

“Might be.”

It was nearly six before all the checking and cleaning had been done, and Ed felt exhausted. They’d been lucky; none of the lights seemed to have been affected, and Terry had crawled around all the wiring channels and reported that they were clear of droppings. “The fake cleaners couldn’t have got up there,” he’d said. “That panel was just a target of opportunity.”

“Yeah, well we’ll have to make sure it’s kept locked from now on,” Ed said, and tottered down to the auditorium to sit down for a while, where Marco and Barry had found him.

“Christ, you look buggered, mate,” Marco said.

“Come on,” Barry reached over and pulled Ed to his feet. “We’re going to get some food inside you before you drop. Can’t have the stage manager fainting at the dress; that’s the privilege of the Prima Donna.”

They led him away to the Bellagio, where Agnello sat them down and gave them strong espresso without being asked.

“Agnello, my sweet,” Barry said, “Does Serafina have anything to eat out the back? Ed here is starving.”

“I wouldn’t mind a nibble meself,” Marco said.

“I think she has some pasta, and there is always my mother’s sugo to go with it. She makes vats of it when tomatoes are in season, and sends us many jars. It is truly excellent. Twenty minutes.” And with that he passed into the kitchen, calling out for Serafina.

The hot, black coffee helped to soothe Ed a little, and he relaxed as he waited for the food. Agnello brought him another cup and said “You look sad, Ed. Maybe a little grappa in the coffee?”

Ed grinned at the thought. “Christ, no; that’s all I’d need. I’d fall over and Bec would have to run the dress.” He drained his cup. “No, just keep these coming and I’ll bless you forever.” As Agnello bustled away for another cup, Ed said “The NIDA kids you organised for front of house will be there at seven, and I’ll have to be there before that to show them what to do.”

“No, you don’t,” Barry said. “They’ve all done front of house before, and it’s the dress, so they won’t be taking money and there are only a few hundred people who’ve been invited. They all got their tickets via the magic of email this morning, and if they don’t have a ticket we have a list of names. Bec knows all the NIDA kids and Linda can organise the rest of it. Don’t rush. Take a break. You need it.”

“Yeah, mate,” Marco put in, “you’re buggered. Terry had a break after he checked the wires and he’s having a nap before the show. Everybody’s had break but you, so you’re takin’ one now if I have to nut you.”

Barry directed the conversation away from the theatre by talking about the holiday he had planned for after the show; off to Italy and down to the Amalfi Coast. He’d been before, and told them a long and complex story, that lasted right through the pasta, of seeing Sophia Loren getting out of her car to go into her house, rushing over to get her autograph and finding he had nothing to write on or with, so he’d cozened her into signing his shirt in lipstick, and she’d added a kiss to it from those famous lips for a bonus. “I’ve still got that shirt,” he sighed, “even though it doesn’t quite fit me any more, and even if it did, it’s hopelessly out of fashion. But Loren will never be out of fashion.” He giggled. “I even got sunburnt on the way back to the hotel I was staying at, because I took the shirt off to preserve it. Ron, the boy I was with, could not *believe* it.”

“That was bloody fabulous, Agnello,” Ed said as the plates were taken. “Thank Serafina for me, and thank your mum the next time you see her. That sugo was the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“Yeah, mate,” Marco said, and followed it with something in Italian that was too fast for Ed to follow. Agnello smiled broadly and replied the same way, asked if they wanted more coffee, and then left to fetch it.

“What was it you said?” Ed asked.

Marco winked at him. “Surprise, mate.”

Agnello returned with the coffee, and a brightly painted little figure which he placed in front of Ed. It was a wooden puppet without strings, about three inches high.

“What’s this?”

“Pinocchio,” Agnello said, beaming. “From my village. Every year my Nona, she send me one to remind me where I come from.” He tossed his hands in the air. “As if I ever forget. Is for you.”

Marco said “That’s right, mate; you’ve got a mojo now.”

Ed stared down at the little figure, with its pointy hat and equally pointy nose, collapsed on its spindly legs, arms hanging down as if dejected, but a perky painted smile on its wooden face.

“Eh,” Agnello said, “you have a little bit of Toscano now, to bring you luck.”

Ed looked up at him. “Thanks, mate.” He looked back down at Barry and Marco. “And thank you too.” He reached out and took the little doll and put it in his shirt pocket. “Pinocchio comes backstage with me from now on.” He checked his watch. “And now I think we should stroll back to the theatre, before I start to waste all this relaxation.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After he'd checked everything, Ed said to Linda, "It's bloody perfect. I don't think you need me around here. Bec and you have got everything lined up perfectly."

Linda gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and said, "We still need you as token male and sex object."

"You've got Leon for that."

"Nah, he's taken, now."

"Jesus, does everyone know?"

"Just about."

The actors had all arrived before the half-hour call and were in costume, going through their pre-show rituals. The warbling of vocal exercises disturbed the air, and some were walking up and down, waving their arms and rehearsing lines. It was all familiar, comforting, really, that there were no signs of bad nerves or stage jitters. Madelyn had come in at the thirty and wished them all broken legs, and they had applauded her. "I expect a fucking great show from you tonight," she said. "Not just because you have to convince that dried up-prick Deane that this is really Shakespeare, but because you've worked as hard as any troupe I've ever seen to get it right. You owe it to yourselves to be brilliant. That's what I expect." Ed was astounded to see the hint of a tear in her eye as she turned and left.

They shuffled a little and stayed quiet, as if they were suddenly embarrassed by Madelyn's praise.

And then Barry rushed in. "God," he said, "The Governor General's come! He was in town for something and Mayne invited him. And we haven't got a bartender!"

"That should have been sorted out by the front of house people."

"They didn't think of it!"

Ed thought rapidly. "Okay, after the show we can use backstage crew to staff it."

"What about the interval?"

"It's okay. Ask if any front of house people can do it. It's not too hard, after all. They just have to pull a few beers and serve wine and things. Don't worry; it can be arranged in a hurry, and we'll get some professionals in tomorrow."

Barry rushed off to arrange it with the front of house, and Ed patted his pocket. "Easily solved, little fella."

The front seats of the auditorium were filling up, and Ed checked the backstage clock. Ten minutes. A final check of the props table, a call to Terry and a quick check with Arthur and it was time. He went down and called “Five minutes everyone,” touched wood, crossed his fingers and patted Pinocchio. Then it was “Beginners on stage,” cue the music, cue lights, and it was on.

Despite the tension, everything was suspiciously smooth. Bruno behaved himself in his big scene and didn’t piddle on a chair or bark at the wrong time. Tess’s influence was calming him as much as it was calming Leon, Ed thought. From the very moment he appeared on stage, it was clear that Kevin had the part of Roland down pat, and Ed’s worries about him coping with an audience diminished.

“He’s good,” Bec whispered to Ed.

“Yes, but tomorrow night’s the test, and that’s when the critics will be in.” They hadn’t invited any tonight but for the few journalists who’d been at the debate, and those had had to sign non-disclosure statements as they came into the foyer.

The rest of the cast were on song, focused on their parts and working together as smoothly as cold cream, but it was Henry Stringfellow who stood out. He played the king brilliantly, exploring every possible facet of his character. He created a portrait of someone who was the absolute authority, arrogant as Satan, penitent as only a great sinner can be, saddened and distraught behind his haughty veneer, shattered when his son dies, as angry as Zeus when challenged by a pretender who he knew could not be the real prince, all this combined with a sly humour and intelligence as he dealt with the petty sycophants who peopled his court. In his soliloquy, where he begged god not to blame his son, Arthur, for his sins against the princes in the tower, Bec struggled to hold back sniffles. He was reduced from a ruler to a father with a dying son, pleading for forgiveness, and it was a powerful scene. The transition from that to Roland’s carousing utterances in the next scene, where he sneered at Arthur’s weakness and intimated that he’d already had a dalliance with Katherine, Arthur’s wife, almost drew hisses from the audience. The scene with Roland and his cronies was set so that the tavern room was above the stage on a platform, so that the lights went down on the main stage, leaving Henry kneeling and supplicant in front of his throne, a shadow below the sneering Roland. The last scene of act three was the next, very brief, very powerful. A messenger came in, Leon in another costume, discovered the king kneeling and, on being questioned by him as to his purpose, tells him “My Lord, your son is dead.” After a bit more about sorrowful duty, unwelcome news and so forth, the King dismissed him and resumed his throne. Gradually his head rose, and firmness came back into his face and he delivered the final line of the scene: “I have another son, a wastrel and, if God is willing I will make him king.” Curtain, and applause.

Linda came up from below as the cast came offstage and said “I think they liked it. I can hear it from downstairs.”

“Yeah,” Ed said, “But did they like it enough?”

“They were pretty sucked in,” Bec said. “You could have heard a pin drop in those last scenes. Isn’t Roland a bastard, though?” She went off to check props and set up for the next act.

Ed and Linda went downstairs to check the cast. They were in a flurry of costume changes and adjusting make-up and Linda went to help those who needed it while Ed went to Henry’s dressing room. He’d already changed out of the blue and burgundy outfit he’d worn in the previous scene to the black mourning clothes he would wear in the next act. His feet were propped up and he was drinking a glass of water and humming a Gilbert and Sullivan air as he read a magazine. “Wotcher,” he said. “How’s it going up there? Any dead bodies drop out of the flies yet?”

“Jesus, don’t jinx us. It’s going pretty well, by the sound of the audience.”

“Ah, the roar of the crowd; how I love it. And,” he took a drink, “strangely enough a desire for bodies not to fall out of the flies is not in the lexicon of theatrical jinxes, as far as I know.”

Ed hooked a thumb to the stage. “You were bloody good up there.”

“Ta. All praise gratefully accepted.”

Ed hesitated, and said “It must be hard to come back down from that.”

Henry laughed. “Oh, dear boy; it’s just *acting*.”

Ed shook his head and grinned, then moved across to Kevin’s dressing room. “How’s it going?” he said.

Kevin smiled up at him. “So far, so good. Y’know, it feels right, up there. I feel like I’m in the right place.”

“Well, Bec thinks Roland’s a right bastard, if that’s any comfort.”

“I’ll have to buy her a drink after the show for that compliment.”

Ed left him and checked around the rest of the cast to see if he was needed for anything, but Linda and Bec between them had everything under control, so he went back up and checked with Terry on the intercom.

“No problems here. I’m set up for the next act.”

“Okay, ring the bells and I’ll give them the five minute.” He called Arthur first and gave him three minutes warning, went down and warned the cast and did the last minute checks. It was time. He cued Arthur and called beginners, and act four began.

OoO

For a small crowd, Ed thought, they could make a lot of noise. They were all on their feet for a fourth bow, even Deane and his party, and Ed gave Mick and Stan the nod for the curtain to come down for the last time. “They’ve been out there long enough,” he said. Even though the curtain stayed closed they continued to applaud for a few minutes, until they got the message that it wasn’t going to go up again, and then the applause died away and a hubbub of conversation took its place. “Okay,” Ed called to the crew, “good one, everybody. Last props off and Bec, can you collect them from downstairs, please? Five o’clock call tomorrow for set-up, and thank you again; you did a great job.”

He busied himself helping with the props, and then went down to help Linda with the costumes. The cast were drifting away after they were changed and out of make-up, some to the bar, some home, some to a destination midway for coffee or to avoid the fans. Actors were like that; some couldn’t wait to receive the plaudits of the crowd, some avoided the fans, some could take it or leave it. As everybody had a routine to work up to the play, they all had a routine to wind down from it. Some of those routines involved a great deal of drinking. They’d all come to the bar tomorrow night for the party after, but more than a few were just going home. They all knew that, good as tonight was, it was tomorrow that was the real test.

It took less than an hour to clean up, and then Ed and Linda thought they deserved a drink. The bar still had a few people in it, although most of the audience had left. One or two scruffy academics were around, and Mayne, Barry and Marco waved them over to where they sat in a booth. “We’re having champagne,” Mayne said, “to celebrate our victory.”

“What victory?” Ed said, sliding into the booth.

“Deane conceded,” Barry said. “Shook hands with Adam and said the play could only have been Shakespeare’s work.”

“Yeah,” Marco put in, “and he looked a bit sheepish about it, as well. They went off together looking like great mates.”

Mayne gave a great snort of laughter. “They’ll be great mates until the books start to come out. I intend to put in the foreword that Deane acknowledged the legitimacy of *Henry VII* and, by implication, the rest of the plays as well. I might even kick back a few dollars to him as a consultant,” he said, and laughed again, and took a great swallow of champagne.

Henry had drifted over to join them. "It's easy to be magnanimous in victory," he said.

"Well, here's to another problem solved," Ed said, raising his glass.

"Would they were all this easy."

"You were fuckin' good tonight," Marco said to Henry.

"Ta, old cock. It's nice to be appreciated for one's efforts." He gestured around the bar. "Where's Maddie?"

"She was here earlier," Mayne said, looking around while he poured himself another glass of champagne. "I think I saw her with Kevin, over in the corner." He gestured, but neither Madelyn nor Kevin was there. "You know, I may wake up with a hangover tomorrow, but right now I really don't give a shit. We won a major victory tonight."

"Kevin went home about ten minutes ago," Linda said. "He called out goodbye as he left."

"Maddie wasn't with him?" Henry said.

"No, he was on his own."

"Ah, well; she's a big girl now, and she will appear or not at her own will." He put his glass down on the table and bowed to them. "And now I will disappear. I have had a sufficiency, and to stay would only put temptation in my way. Toodle-pip."

They all gradually drifted away after that, Barry escorting Mayne while he sang a Beatles song off-key, Ed staying to switch off the bar lights. He walked back up into the auditorium, heading towards the stage door. Only a couple of sidelights were on in the wings and the hall was black, but there was a sudden flare of light twelve rows back. Ed went down, and discovered Madelyn there, smoking a cigarette. She had a bottle of vodka with her, half-empty.

"Hey, Madelyn," Ed said.

There was no reply. She took a long drag on her cigarette and blew out the smoke, her eyes remaining fixed on the stage. Ed moved along the row and sat down a couple of seats away from her. "You okay, Madelyn?"

"Tristesse," she said quietly, not looking at him. "Melancholy sadness. Often associated with a post-orgasm state. The big moment has come and gone, but what comes next? What's the next big bang?" she tapped the ash off her cigarette into an ashtray on the seat next to her. She reached over to the bottle, unscrewed the cap and took a swallow, then offered it to Ed. He shook his head. "Wise man,"

she said. "Kills off brain cells, fucks up your liver and gives you a bad attitude the next day, and you have a job to do tomorrow." She took another sip. "Even in this light, the stage looks good. Marco's a fucking genius."

Ed stayed quiet. There was a fey look to her, as if she was looking at the stage, but seeing something else, something more distant and not quite defined.

"They were good tonight. Very good. There were a few things I wanted to say to a couple of individuals, but it worked." She turned her face to Ed for the first time. "Fooled 'em again, hey?"

"Sure did."

She laughed. "Fooled 'em again. For a while they were there," she pointed with the cigarette, took a final drag and stubbed it into the ashtray, "in that world. My world."

"You had a few things to say to Kevin, I hear."

She laughed quietly again. "You swear at them, work them like cart-horses, abuse them again, and every one of them gets a piece of your heart. Then they stand up, after all the sweat, all the struggle and strife, after all the vitriol and love, and they're not a pack of bitchy, temperamental kids who have to be coddled and yelled at and have their noses wiped and their arguments resolved, they're Henry and his court, and it's 1500, or thereabouts, and they make magic." She took another swig from the bottle and put the cap back on. "I talked to Kevin about his balls." She looked at Ed and raised an eyebrow. "Because he'd lost them somewhere. He was acting. It was good acting, good enough to fool them in front, but there was no balls in it. I told him to try and find some by tomorrow night." She rolled her eyes. "God, there are enough people in the cast willing to help him look. Claire asked him to help her unhook her dress after the show, turning around very prettily and holding it afterwards to thank him, just letting it slide down slowly until just the *tops* of her nipples were exposed. Nothing too obvious, y'know."

Ed laughed. "Claire will flirt with anything in pants. But she never takes offence at a knockback, just moves on to the next in line."

"Yeah, well, Kevin has a little hottie back home in L.A., to whom he's promised to be true, so Claire and the rest are just going to have to get used to knockbacks. Oh," she said, and held out her hand, "and congratulations to you and Linda."

He took her hand. "Thanks."

"Set the date yet?"

He shook his head. “No. Sometime after the show gets settled in and is running smoothly. We’ll take a little time off for a honeymoon somewhere.”

She slumped back in her seat. “Yeah. That’s the difference.” Her face was almost immobile as she spoke. In the dim light she looked like some old survivor of a long war, thousand-yard stare on her face, looking into a mordant night. “You’ll run the show for as long as it lasts, or as long as you want to. Hell, I know shows where they have to roster annual holidays for the cast and crew, have medical benefits and a pension plan.”

Ed nodded slowly. He knew shows like that, too, but he’d never wanted to work them, nor had Linda. Now, it didn’t seem all that bad.

“Not me,” she said. “I’ll give them a few notes tomorrow, before the show, maybe come in a few days after to see how it’s running, come back after a couple of weeks and make some suggestions, and then I’m gone.” She shook her head and it dropped a little. “I’m gone. Goodbye kids, goodbye Henry and Roland and all my children.”

“To the next show.”

“Yeah, there is that. To go through it all again.” She turned slightly, casting part of her face into deeper shadow. “Hank told me he’d spilled the beans about me.” She spoke quietly, flatly.

Ed nodded. “Hell of a story,” he said.

“Yeah. Poor kid makes good in theatre; real *A Star is Born* stuff. Gives it all up for the stage. Well, that’s part right.” She turned her head to look at him more directly. “The other part is that I’ve always, *always*, been a self-seeking bitch, even when they were pushing me into being a nun. You know why I went along with that?”

Ed shook his head.

“It was the only way I could get away from my fucking family.” She sat up straighter. “A dumb Mick of a father, drunk half the time and hung-over the rest, a mother who would rather face up to god than the facts about her family, and a bunch of brothers who were just as bloody minded about getting their own way as I was. Hell, I’d willingly trade a few years of chastity, poverty and obedience for leaving that shit. The nuns would have given me some sort of education, at least, and sent me away from the Brooklyn slums.” She rolled her head back to look into the distance of the stage again, her brow furrowed. “Henry doesn’t understand that; that’s why he tracked down my family, what were left of them. I nearly fucking hit him when he told me. He comes from a family who understood him, even when he decided he’d rather be an actor than a lawyer. I came from a family that

understood two things; the bottle and god. There was no room in that family for a girl who didn't want either of them, although," she took the cap off the vodka and took another swig, "I've developed an understanding of one of them."

Ed reached over and took the bottle away from her. She didn't resist. "Do you want me to take you back to the hotel?"

"After the Ortegas died, theatre was all I had. I clutched it to me like my mother had clutched her crucifix while dad beat us when he was drunk. It was my lover, my salvation, my real family. Every show I do, *every fucking show*, is a new family, more kids for me to bring up, with a script for a lover, a father for the children. And I have to walk away."

He took her arm and slowly raised her to her feet. "Come on, I'll get a cab."

She took a look around the darkened theatre. "Yeah, enough of this maudlin shit, this premature post-partum depression." She rounded on Ed and looked at him owlishly. "Linda's getting a good man in you. Don't fuck it up."

He guided her from the seats and up to the stage. "I won't," he said.

She broke from his grasp and went down centre. She shouted:

"Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

In her voice was a certain agony, a certain capitulation, a certain knowledge that, as magical as it might be, every act ends sometime.

"Come on," Ed said, taking her arm again, "let's get that cab."

FOREWORD TO *HENRY VII*, DATED 1601

My humble duty remembered, these lines were those you requested, although I fear that they should not be spoken until this 'teeming womb of royal kings' has made decision on who should succeed Gloriana. My lord, we poor players were honoured by your request to perform our little version of the tragedie of the life of King Richard II, and right glad we were of the patronage, because those troubled times had fragile payments, but right glad was I that the lines to time within this were heard for only a few, in the privy seat of Essex, with myself and a trusted company to model the mouths of these great men, these great villains, and the great truths they moued.

The words they held were traded later, by you, for your freedom, and I will hold them as secret as you have promised. With my death, though I hope this long delayed, you will hold this knowledge alone, and you may prove a good steward in all your wanderings. I would not have these scribbles of mine put to the printer in whole until my coffin is rotted, lest some words be taken at their meaning, but this will be for you to decide, my judge, my friend, my patron and holder of my many secrets.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The cast was called for seven-thirty, although most of them would be in well before that, and the crew for five. Ed and Linda were in from eleven. No rest for the wicked, Ed thought. There were endless details to take care of: the cleaners, deliveries of booze for the bar, telling the front-of-house staff Barry had organised what to do, checking ticket sales with the booking agencies; all the tiny things that had to be done to ensure a smooth show, but were largely invisible.

Fortunately, the house was sold out for tonight and for the next month. The headline in the arts section of the paper had helped a lot: 'The Play's the *Real* Thing,' followed by an interview with Deane where he recanted his doubts in as few words as possible, although it had been beaten up by the reporter into half a page. Now all we have to do is carry it off with a real audience and all the critics in the fucking western world, Ed thought.

Marco had come in an hour or so after Ed and Linda, because he wasn't happy with the hang of some of the backing drapes and wanted to adjust them. The cleaners finished at about three, and reported that there were no fresh signs of rat activity. Ed didn't disbelieve them, but checked, anyway, because that was his job, to check *everything* today. Try as he might, he couldn't find anything out of place or unprepared. He swept the stage again, even though it didn't need it, and then he had nothing to do until the crew came in.

"Come on, Linda said, "let's go and get a coffee. Marco can look after the joint for half an hour."

Marco assured them he could, as he fiddled with a line that guided the hang of one of the backing drapes, and they went to the Bellagio, where Agnello welcomed them with open arms. "Ah, Signorina Linda," he exclaimed, giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek as he ushered them to a table, "congratulations. You will make a beautiful bride."

"Jesus Christ," Ed said. "What did you do? Take out an ad in the paper?"

She shrugged her shoulders and grinned at him. "Good news spreads. Cheer up, you've still got a few weeks as a single man. Just don't respond to the blandishments of that flirty bitch Nicci. Or any of the other flirty bitches in the show. It would be a pity to have to ask Tess about gelding techniques during the run. Might upset Leon if he realises that this time he's fallen for a genuine ball-cutter."

Ed smiled thinly at that. "Oh, I suspect he's met a few genuine ball-cutters in his time."

Agnello brought coffee and biscotti and asked how the bookings were going. Ed told him, and Agnello's face fell. "I hoped we might see this show soon."

Ed considered for a moment. “Y’know, Agnello,” he said, “you’re almost a member of the crew by now. I think we can fix up something for you. We’re not using the boxes unless we’ve got special guests. I reckon you can be a special guest one night, you and Serafina and a few others. They seat eight. Will that do?”

Agnello assured him profusely that it was wonderful, and that he could bring his father and mother to see it as well, and his two sons and his daughter.

“You’re sure one box will be enough?” Ed said. Linda kicked him under the table.

Agnello said it would be wonderful, and that the others of his family, all sixty of them, could just go and buy tickets to this wonderful show by a true Italian.

“What?”

“Everybody knows Shakespeare was Italian,” Agnello said, and went back to the kitchen.

Ed shook his head slowly. “We’ll have to get him and Adam together sometime.”

“I don’t think Adam wants another debate for a while,” Linda said. “And we’d better be getting back.”

OoO

Marco was cursing mildly when they arrived back at the theatre. “I cannot get this bloody thing to hang right,” he said. “Either the bar it hangs from has to be higher, or I’m going to have to carve a hole in that backing flat to lead the line through.”

Ed took a look at the problem. “We can raise the bar a little, but we can’t do it tonight. Not enough time now.”

“Aah, I’ll shove a weight on the end to pull it a bit tighter. That’ll do for tonight.”

Terry wandered in then, and he and Marco got into a deep discussion that soon had Terry up in the box taking lights up and down to check shadows. The rest of the crew arrived in dribs and drabs and filed away to their various stations. Everything was happening at a fairly languid pace, but Ed liked it that way. It left room to get everything right. There’d be plenty of pressure on during the show, so it was good to take it easy right now. He reached up and patted his pocket where his little puppet was. “So far, so good, eh, Pinocchio?” he whispered.

Most of the cast arrived early, along with Barry, Mayne and Madelyn. Greg hadn’t come in yet, but it was still early, and when Nicci came in she said there was a traffic jam on the Bridge, and he might be

held up in that. Ed 'phoned him, and Greg said he was half-way along the Bridge, but it was moving, albeit slowly, and that he'd be there for the half-hour easily.

"Okay," Ed said, "but if there's any chance at all that you won't make the curtain up, call me. I'll put Leon in as Stanley for the night."

"No way! Think I'd bloody miss the first night? I'd get out and run first."

Ed laughed and hung up. They're not wound up yet, he thought as he walked around the dressing rooms greeting people. A little later the nerves will start, the jitters and the first little ooze of flop-sweat. The funny thing is, once they get on the stage, they'll be fine. It's just that first entrance, that first line. As stage manager, he had the prompt script, and he'd underlined every character's first line, just in case. He'd seen too many go on and open their mouths for no words to emerge to take any risks. A quick whisper from backstage was all it took to set them right. Part of the job.

He took orders for anything they wanted for before the show or for interval; drinks, snacks, cigarettes, fruit or sweets. A surprising number of theatre people still smoked, and a couple wanted more cigarettes. Ed sent a NIDA boy out to a local shop with an order. Then there were the deliveries to cope with. Good-luck cards and flowers had started arriving in the afternoon, and there was a flood of them before the thirty. Tony was in for the night, and Ed had called on him to be on the stage door. Some of the people who were sending flowers and baskets of fruit and chocolates to the cast, particularly to the female characters, wanted to deliver them personally. Ed had one rule for Tony: no alcohol to get backstage. There were bottles of champagne being sent, and the cast could have them after the show, but not before. He knew that a couple of them had hip flasks they'd take a quick pull on before the curtain went up for a little courage, but he didn't want to put temptation in the way of the rest.

Then there were the people who demanded to see someone in the cast because they were their uncle/best friend/ long-lost-brother or from the media. Again the rule was firm: only cast and crew backstage. Tony was revelling in the job, putting on his best tone of command and a hard stare for those who were persistent. If that didn't work, he always had the option of calling Mick and his boys to back him up, but it never quite came to that. Christ knows what's going to happen after the show, Ed thought. Nice to see that some of the old traditions, such as the stage-door-Johnny, have been kept up.

Greg got in just before the thirty-minute call and flashed Ed a grin. "Told you I'd make it," he said, and scrambled in to the dressing-room he shared with Sam Hackney, who played John Morton. Ed patted his pocket and muttered, "All here, so that's a good start."

A second later he thought he'd spoken too soon, because there was a crash from the dressing-room and a yell of "Shit!"

Ed raced in. Greg had his hands up to his face, staring down at the floor. Ed followed his gaze and saw, amidst a mess of make-up, a small crystal statuette. Leda and the Swan, he thought. Its head had snapped off. "What happened?" he asked.

"Oh, Jesus, it was my own fucking fault," Greg said as he sat down on his chair. He pointed to the hat he'd been wearing. "I tossed the hat up on to the hat-peg on the door, missed, and it fell down and knocked Mimi off the table. I tried to catch her and knocked her into the table-leg. Shit! Bastard! Fucking idiot!" He looked up at Ed. "My mum bought me that when I graduated from RADA. What do I do?"

"It's okay, Greg," Ed said soothingly. "You don't need it to go on. You're a great actor, and RADA was a long time ago."

Greg made a visible effort and pulled himself together. "You're right. It was something from back when I was a callow ingénue, before I became the parvenu I am today." He smiled. "I'm okay. It was just a bit of a shock."

Ed knelt down and picked up the statuette. It was a clean break. He fitted it back together and could hardly see the join. "I reckon this can be fixed," he said.

"Yeah, but not tonight, I think."

"Do you want me to look after it? I can probably get it fixed tomorrow."

Greg nodded and waved Ed out of the room as he undressed. Sam came past him as he did and Ed whispered to him "Greg broke his lucky charm. Be nice to him." He rolled his eyes and nodded.

And now, Ed thought as he checked the time, it's thirty minutes to curtain.

There was a subtle but distinct change to the air backstage as Ed made the call. It was as if a gear had been changed to a slightly higher one to ensure a destination was reached on time. Thirty minutes away, to be exact, Ed thought as he hurried upstairs to get the personal props. On the way, he bumped into Madelyn as she came down.

"Called the thirty?" she asked.

Ed nodded.

"Okay, I need a couple of minutes."

“Should be fine. They all got in early and most of the beginners are already in costume.”

“Okay.” She went on down. Bec had already put the personal props into a basket that Ed grabbed and took back. He heard Madelyn addressing the assembled cast.

“This is it,” she said, “and you’re all ready for anything they can throw at you, even the cabbages.” That got a laugh, but Ed had trouble comprehending it. Maddie? Making jokes? The same person he’d dragged away from the stage last night in a bout of melancholy? “I mean it,” she went on. “You don’t have a thing to worry about, not critics, not academics, not the audience. You’ll have them eating out of your hands from the first lines. When you walk on that stage, the place is yours. You done good.” With that, she got a round of applause as she turned away. Then she turned back, as if she’d forgotten something. “Oh, I forgot; there is one tiny thing to worry about.” Her voice became softer, but carried further, and quieted them all down. “You need to remember this. If you fuck up on that stage tonight, if you slip, stall, mask or dry, if you bump into the furniture, if you mug or mump or mow, if you don’t reach down into the bottom of your soul and give me every ounce of what you’ve got, if you don’t hang your balls out on a barbed wire fence to make this the best performance of your life, I will be sitting out front, row twelve, centre, and I will know, and I know where every single one of you lives. Have a good time.”

They were frozen as she left, but she slipped Ed a wink as she passed him. A few nervous titters started up, and then swelled into the usual dull roar of backstage. Ed dropped in to Henry’s room to deliver props and found him sipping on his tea, already in costume and make-up. “Wotcher,” he said. “Care for a cup of brew?”

“No thanks,” Ed said. “No time.”

“Did you catch that little performance out there?”

“I did. I think she shook them rigid.”

“All par for the course. She always delivers the Hamlet speech before a show. ‘Speak the speech I pray you, trippingly off the tongue,’ etcetera.”

“It certainly got her some attention,” Ed said as he left. He circulated around the rooms and wound up at Kevin’s. He was sitting in front of the mirror, make-up mostly done, with an expression of consternation on his face. Ed dropped his props on the table and asked “What’s up?”

“Ed, y’know, something just hit me. I did the show last night, and it was good, damn near perfect, even though Madelyn wants more. But I have to do the show again tonight, and then again tomorrow, and again, and again, until the end of the run, and it’s always got to be at least as good as it was the night before, and I’ve got to keep looking for ways to make it better.” He shook his head slowly. “It’s

not like that in movies. When it's a wrap, it's finished, over, and you don't have to do it again. It's a take, and that's as good as it gets."

Ed slapped him on the shoulder. "That's entertainment, Kevin," he said with a grin.

Kevin grinned back. "Yeah, I sort of like it." More seriously. "But do you ever get over the nerves?"

"I don't think you do. Use it."

"Yeah, well," he tapped the picture on his table, "Momma's watching."

Ed left him and headed up to the wings. There are two types of actors, he thought; those who take a peek at the audience before the show, and those who don't. Greg was one of the former. He'd flicked up one of the little peepholes in the curtain and was eyeing the house. Ed crept up beside him. "How's it look?" he said.

"Absolutely packed. Never seen a house that full. What's the time?"

Ed checked his watch. "Ten minutes."

"Time for a pee before we go on."

He went to the stairs, waved at Ed, missed his footing on the top step and bumped clumsily all the way to the bottom of the spiral staircase.

"Oh, Christ," Ed said as he rushed over to the stairs. Greg lay at their foot, groaning and holding his leg.

Ed went down the stairs two at a time and waved back the crowd that had gathered. "Greg, how bad is it?"

"Knee's fucked," Greg said through gritted teeth.

"You can't go on." He turned and called to the concerned faces at the top of the stairs, "Bec, call front of house and tell them to get an ambulance around to the backstage door. Greg's fallen."

"Fuck that. I've never missed a show." He pulled himself up with the help of the banister and tried to walk. He fell at the first step. His face was screwed up in agony.

"Yeah, well, you're missing to tonight's show, mate. Stay there and don't move. Mick," he beckoned him over. "Get a blanket over him and then get upstairs for the curtain. "Leon," he yelled, "get over here."

Leon arrived in a scramble. "What?"

“You’re doing Stanley tonight. Help get his doublet off.”

“What!”

Ed turned to face him. “You’re the understudy for all the male roles. You know his part. You’re on.”

Leon gulped. “Okay. Who’s going to do my bit parts?”

Ed yelled “Get down here” up the stairs to one of the NIDA boys who’d been watching.

He clattered down in a hurry. “What?” he asked.

“You’re an actor tonight. Grab Leon’s doublet and get a pair of hose from Linda. Leon, show him your props.” He checked the time. “We can run without the third guard for act one. Get Linda to run you through the script for Leon’s bit parts there are, what? Three?”

Leon nodded. “Yeah, one in the first half and two in the second.”

“That’s enough time to learn a few lines and moves. Leon will help you when he gets offstage.” He checked his watch. “Okay, five minutes, everybody.”

He raced upstairs and got on to the intercom. “Terry, you’ll have to make an announcement. Greg’s had a fall and Leon’s playing the part. Understand? I can’t do it from here because there’s no PA. The announcement is that tonight the part of Thomas Stanley will be played by Leon Tailor. Got that? That’s all you have to say. Okay? I’ll cue you when to do it.”

He switched channels without waiting for the reply and contacted front of house. “Ring the bells,” he said, and the last of the audience began to file in and find their seats. “Close the bloody doors as soon as the overture starts. This show *is* going to go up on time.” He turned to Bec and said “Go down and give the beginners call.” Mick stared at him from the curtain ropes, where he stood ready with one of the other mechs beside him. “Give us the cue when you’re ready, Ed.”

Ed nodded in reply and got on to Arthur in the pit. “What happened?” Arthur asked.

“Greg had a fall. Leon’s going on. Are you ready?”

“We’re fine here. Do you want us to cover with a longer overture?”

Ed thought rapidly. “I hope we don’t have to. If there’s a problem, I’ll turn on the red light and leave it on as long as we need to cover. Can you do that?”

“As long as you need us to.”

“Shit,” Ed said, and then switched back to Terry. “Cue the announcement, then lights cue one, go.”

Ed could hear footsteps coming up the stairs. He thought rapidly. Roland was on stage at the curtain up, and Stanley entered stage right. There was a little scene between them and then a black-out to the court scene, which was achieved by Bec and the other stage-hand, Xavier, racing out in the black and turning the throne around to face the audience. Henry entered with his entourage, and there was a long scene until a blackout. That might give him time to get things more organised.

He heard the announcement as Leon came up, ready to get into position on set. Henry and the entourage were early and gathered on stage left. Kevin came up and stood beside him, looking grim. The house lights went down and he clicked the light to cue Arthur. He gave the nod to Leon to get on set. "Break a . . ." he began to whisper, but Leon put his finger to his lips and shushed him.

"Just say 'chookas,' mate."

"Chookas it is."

Ed looked around. All was set. The overture was coming to its close. He fingered the cue button for Arthur, but let it alone. He saw that Leon was ready to go. He looked at Kevin and hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

Kevin brushed past him to go out on stage and lounge against his pillar. He looked at Ed and gave a feral grin. "Fuck it," he said. "Let's stick it to the bastards."

Ed nodded to Mick and, as the curtain began to rise, whispered "Lights cue one, go."

The lights went up. The show was on.

OoO

As Ed had expected, the audience applauded the curtain up, set and Kevin. It was the excitement of being in a theatre and seeing a live show, of showing their appreciation to the cast and crew and everybody, even when nothing had happened yet. It was a nice token, but sometimes he wished they'd just shut up and let everyone get on with their job. They'd applauded Kevin so much that he'd paused a little before his first line. Ed had had his heart in his mouth, praying that he hadn't dried, but he was just showing a little of the stagecraft that had developed over the last couple of months. Way back when rehearsals had started, he probably would have taken a bow. As it was, whether it was nerves about first night, Leon playing Stanley, or just a coming together of everything, Madelyn would be satisfied that he'd found his balls. He had a depth tonight that hadn't been present before, a muscularity that let him prowl the stage like a big cat, frustrated at his position as the bastard son, but far too cunning to make it obvious.

Leon played Stanley's role as if he had been born to it. The traitor, turncoat and untrusted ally who now found his lot cast with Henry, but felt guilt over his betrayal of Richard, knowing that there was something wrong, but unable to discover it. The strong man who had become an old man in Henry's court, who harboured a burning envy that he was not quite able to disguise. Luckily, Stanley was more prominent in the last two acts, so there was time to go over the moves and the lines in the interval. Also time to pay a little more attention to Leon's make-up to age him. He was doing well, his posture suggesting an old man, but he was careful not to draw too much attention to his face.

Act two was a short one, set in Ludlow Castle, where Arthur, Henry's heir, lay dying. There were only five scenes, two in the bedchamber, two in the forecourt and one in the antechamber. Marco had done wonders with two three-sided flats to change the scene to the forecourt and antechamber, and Henry's throne unfolded to become Arthur's bed. A scrim was pulled out to divide the two chambers, and Terry had the lights set so that only one chamber was lit at a time.

The last two scenes were crucial. The first three were setting the scene for a potential betrayal, but in scene four Roland confronted Henry regarding his prospects if Arthur was to die. It was subtle, with Roland becoming increasingly cynical about Henry's evasions, and ended with him cracking on to Catherine, Arthur's wife.

The last scene was Henry and Arthur together in the bedchamber. It was a piteous father, a dying son and an admission that all was not well, and that Arthur had to get better because Henry didn't fancy the chances of his younger son, the Duke of York. He also let slip that there was another problem; that the two princes in the tower had not been killed, but spirited away, and no-one knew what had happened to them. Somewhere, there might be another claimant to the throne.

Bec finished the scene change and gave Ed the nod to cue the lights.

The first three scenes were good, all that could be wanted, but the next was electric. The face-off between Roland and Henry was breathtaking, where Roland reminded Henry "--- my liege, you have two sons, and duty's due them, but here you have another. What for the bastard?" Roland's suppressed anger was palpable, and there was not a sound from the audience. He wanted to be acknowledged as a son, albeit with a bend sinister. He wanted his father to show he loved him and wanted him. Ed could feel the audience leaning forward in their seats to hear Henry's reply.

It came in a voice that reminded the world that Henry was the man who had defeated Richard. A voice as hard as a fist, that carried contempt for the pettiness of this argument when a son lay dying. "His place, and he should learn it," Henry replied, and it was as if Roland had been slapped in the face. He recoiled, but couldn't stare down Henry, who had drawn himself up to be both as regal as an Old-Testament prophet and as much a warrior as he had been on Bosworth Field. The moment held, the

tension crackling between them, then Roland bowed his head in submission, and Henry exited. There was a pause and then Roland said, in a low growl that carried to every corner of the house, "My place! Aye, I'll learn my place, and it will be a lesson for us both." Catherine entered then, and Roland threw her an elaborate bow and began his seduction, the older man of twenty-seven and the girl of seventeen with a sick younger husband.

"You know," Ed whispered to Linda, who'd come up to check on how things were going, "I thought Leon could do this part, but Kevin's doing it better than I thought he ever could."

"Scary, isn't it?"

He gave her a quick squeeze and cued the scene change as Kevin and Nicci exited. He saw that Kevin was trembling and gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. His muscles were as taut as cables. "Bloody good out there," Ed whispered. Kevin gave him a sharp nod in reply and hurried off downstairs. Nicci whispered to Ed as she followed Kevin down "Jesus, he's on song tonight. I would've fucked him right then and there on the stage, given half a chance."

"He's engaged."

"Bugger, and he'd probably be faithful, the big goof. Ah, well; there's always Leon."

"There's Tess."

"Bugger again, I'd forgotten." She winked at him. "You reckon Henry's too old?"

"You'd have to ask him."

Nicci patted Ed gently on the bum and vanished. Linda stifled her laughter and said "Some stage door lothario might be in luck tonight." She left then to get costumes ready for the next act.

Act three was back in the palace, apart from the second-last scene, which was set in a tavern. As good as it was last night, tonight was even better. The vitriolic bitterness Roland expressed in witty asides to his cronies revealed something else; the sense of rejection that fuelled them, with just a hint of what the man could have been had he been born the other side of the blanket. It got Ed to wondering about the history of the time. He'd asked Adam about it, and been told that a hell of a lot of it was confused, some was fact, some was conjecture and some was just plain made up. After the wrenching last scene, the audience exploded into applause that became excited conversation as they shuffled out. Ed breathed a sigh of relief. It was all working, Leon had come through like the trouper he was beneath all the bullshit, and Stan had managed his small parts better than could be expected. Now he had twenty minutes to learn his last couple of parts as a messenger and a guard calling out "who goes

there?” Luckily, they didn’t call for much movement. Moves were always harder to learn than lines, particularly when you couldn’t go on stage to rehearse them.

He called “Twenty minutes, everyone,” to the cast and helped set the stage for act four. There was time for a quick breather, so he headed downstairs to get drinks for the crew. Kevin, Leon and Stan, I’ll have to find out his full name for the programme, Ed thought, were huddled together with scripts. The familiar chaos of costume changes and make-up retouching was all around him as he grabbed drinks from the fridge and headed back, and then he paused for a moment on the stairs. Christ, he thought as he listened to the chatter and the patter, and smiled, this hyper-emotional bedlam is a joy. There must be something wrong with me. He laughed, called “Five minutes, everyone,” and kept going up to the place that was really his home.

CHAPTER TWENTYONE

Act four had finished and they were setting act five when Marco came over to Ed. “What’s up?” he said.

“There’s still something wrong with that fuckin’ scrim, and it’s getting worse. The line’s drooping. I was up in the bio box with Terry and I saw it. I’m going to have a look at it. Maybe the knot’s slipped at the top or something.”

“Hang on, I’ll come with you.”

Ed gestured Bec over, passed her the prompt script and then scrambled around to stage left, but Marco had beaten him up the ladder and was checking lines when he got up. “Have you got a torch?” he whispered. Ed passed him one from his pocket. The light cast around the blacked-out set without revealing much. “Nah, I must be imagining it.” He poked around more but couldn’t see anything.

Ed heard the between-acts music begin to wind down and whispered “Turn out the light. Act five’s going up.”

Marco nodded and brought the light up to turn it off, but then pointed it out along the batten the scrim hung from. “Jesus Christ,” he said. He grabbed Ed’s arm and pointed out to what he’d just seen. The ropes fastening the scrim to the batten were coming apart. Half of them were already hanging loose.

Ed grabbed the torch and turned it off just as he heard Bec whisper for the lights to go and cued the curtain. “It’s those bloody rats,” he whispered to Marco. “They must have got up here and chewed on the fastenings. I couldn’t see it from below.”

“If those fuckin’ ropes break all the way along it’ll take that scrim down and dangle it right over Henry’s throne. It must have been eaten away to start with, and I stressed it with those fuckin’ stage weights.”

“What can we do?”

Marco eyed the remains of the burnt-out grid. A few stubby bits of walkway were fenced off by yellow warning tape, and one or two remaining cables hung down the blackened interior of the fly-tower. “You can get down and get those bloody weights off the scrim as soon as there’s a blackout. I’m going to try to get across there.”

“You can’t! It’s not safe.”

Marco turned to Ed and grabbed his shirt with a surprising strength. “That show is not going to stop and my fuckin’ set is not goin’ to fall down around their bloody ears,” he hissed into Ed’s ear. “I’ve been down in the auditorium, and those bastards are eating it up with forks. I saw bloody hardened reviewers with tears in their eyes at the end of act three. This bloody show is *not* going to turn into a first-night farce because part of the set falls down. Now get goin’.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Ed swore quietly to himself as he made his way as softly as possible down the ladder and into prompt corner. Fortunately it was a rowdy scene with Kevin and the boys coming back to the palace, due to break into a right royal row between Roland and Stanley because the king was in mourning. He explained to Bec what was happening and she rolled her eyes and nodded, and then he moved quietly to the offending weights. They were stage left, hidden by the wing and a masking flat, but the scrim would be seen to shift if he moved them when the lights were up. He had to wait. He’d briefed Bec to hold the cue for the next scene until he got back to her. He took a look up into the flies and saw Marco edging his way to the point where the batten was lashed to a steel pipe jutting out from the back of the proscenium arch. He’d got hold of a cable and was using it to steady himself as he crept as gently as he could to the batten, as if the scrim might break away and fall with the slightest breath. Oh, God, Ed thought, and it very well might.

Kevin and Leon were going at it hammer and tongs. Ed hoped that would mask any sounds coming from backstage or overhead. Marco had passed where the lights didn’t reach, and it was hard to make out just what he was doing. It will be even worse when the lights go down for the scene change, Ed thought. He’s got one chance to do whatever he’s going to do, and he’ll have to do it in the black. Just then he heard the last line of the scene, Stanley telling Roland that the King had got rid of one threat to his crown just three years ago when he’d had Perkin Warbeck beheaded, and he probably wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of another. “Good night and live with silence” and the lights came down.

Ed lunged delicately for the weights to pick them straight up without touching the scrim. He got one, heavy at the end of his arm, and he felt the scrim twitch, even though he hadn’t touched it. Marco was doing something up the top, but Ed didn’t have time to look, even if he’d been able to see anything in the darkness. He got rid of the weight with the softest of thuds, picked up the second and the scrim was free at the bottom. It twitched again as Ed put the weight with the other and scurried over to Bec to give her the word. He whispered to her “Do *not* tell the cast; they’ve got enough to worry about.” She nodded and called the cue as Ed went back and up the ladder to the remains of the walkway. As the lights came up he could just see the figure of Marco leaning out from the burnt rim, holding the cable. He was holding on to something with his other hand. Ed followed it down to the batten and saw what Marco had done. He’d taken off his belt, threaded it through the eyelet in the scrim and around the batten. There was nowhere to tie it off, so he had to hold it to keep it from slipping.

Ed made a move to go to Marco's help, but he shook his head vigorously to stop him. He inclined his head to the walkway, and Ed could see where one of the burnt boards had cracked. It wouldn't have held him. Ed spread his hands in dumb show to try to say "How can I help?"

Marco mouthed to him "How long?"

Ed checked his watch. There were six scenes in the last act, and they were a few minutes into scene two. He looked back at Marco and held up his both his hands, opening and closing them twice and one of them again to indicate twenty-five minutes. Marco swore silently, and then nodded, a grim look on his face. He was going to hold on to that belt come hell or high water.

Ed rushed silently back down the ladder and over to Mick at the curtain. "Two bows only," he whispered. "I don't care if they're throwing their knickers on the stage, only two bows. Marco's stuck up in the flies holding a bloody scrim up by main force and we have to get him down."

Mick looked startled but said "Okay. There's an extension ladder in the back. One of my boys can help you get it ready. Can we put it up now, to give him some help?"

"No. There's a flat behind him that it would push forward. He's going to have to drop the scrim after the curtain comes down and come back over the edge of the flat."

"Jesus."

The lights went down for the scene change and Ed took a NIDA boy who was spare back to the ladder. They extended it as gently as they could and propped it against the wall. Linda saw what they were doing and came over. "What's that for?" she said. Ed explained hurriedly.

"How much longer does he need to hold?"

"About twenty minutes. This next scene's short, and scene four's only a bit longer. The long one is scene five, and then the close."

"You get up there and give him a bit of moral support. Danny and I can get the ladder in place. Bec can run the curtain with Mick."

Ed gave her a quick kiss and hustled through exiting cast members to get up the side ladder. He made it up in the black and settled himself just as the lights came up. He waved at Marco and indicated how long was left with his fingers again. Marco gave him a terse nod in reply and then closed his eyes to focus on the task. Sweat was running down his face and he gave his head a shake to clear it from his eyes.

Ed suddenly realised something; Henry's throne was just below Marco, and Henry spent most of scene five sitting there. Marco's sweat would drip down right on top of Henry. Ed thought quickly, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. The only thing he could do was warn Henry and hope it wouldn't throw him off his stroke.

He clambered back down the ladder in the scene change and went down to find Henry. He said "I have to tell you something, but don't, for god's sake, tell the others." He filled him in and told him "So if there's anything dripping on you, it's Marco sweating. Okay?"

Henry looked at him. "Ed, as long as he doesn't lose his footing and land in my lap, I will carry on. If he does, I'll pretend he's a hyperactive ghost. Now bugger off and do what you can. I'm on in about one minute."

Ed only just made it up the ladder before the lights came back up for scene five, and Marco didn't look good. His hand on the cable was white-knuckled, and his eyes were closed. As the scene went on, he began to sway a little, and Ed just hoped that it wasn't visible from the audience. The scene seemed interminable, and it was a quiet, intense one where Henry reflected on what he could do to keep the throne safe now that Arthur was dead. It ended with the papal legate coming in and giving him the good word that the pope would look favourably on Catherine marrying Henry of York, for a consideration. As the lights went down, Ed looked across and saw Marco slip and almost fall.

"Jesus," Ed breathed. He looked around desperately in the dim light and saw there was another cable close by. He stretched out and could just nudge it with his fingertips. That started it swaying and he did it again to increase the motion. As the lights came back up, he could see that Marco was drooping, as if he was going to fall at any moment.

The cable swung back, almost within reach, and Ed nudged it one more time. The next time it came back, he caught it. Breathing a prayer to the puppet in his pocket and any gods that were available and would listen, he wrapped the cable twice around his hand and swung, tip-toeing across the cracked board and grabbed Marco around the waist just as his fingers slipped from the cable. He could see a tremor pass down the scrim, but hoped the audience was too focused on Henry laying out to Henry, Duke of York, just what was going to happen to preserve the dynasty.

"You will no longer be the stray. You'll be my proper son, or by the Lord, I'll find another!" Henry's voice thundered over the stage, forcing poor York back a pace. The menace was a tangible thing, even from where Ed hung.

"I've got you, mate," Ed whispered to Marco. "Just hang on to that belt."

Marco gave a feeble nod and mumbled back “I’ve got it wrapped around my hand. It won’t go until I go.”

“Well, neither of us is going to do a trapeze act tonight.”

It was remarkable how heavy the little man could become in just a few minutes. Christ, Ed thought, he’s been hanging like this for twenty minutes. He’s a ballsy little bastard.

Time ticked away, and Ed was going through the lines in his head, counting down. His own arms were starting to tremble now, and he blinked to keep the sweat out of his eyes. Relief came with the creak of the curtain ropes and a rush of air as it went down. There was a tempest of applause.

“Hold on. Just a minute more,” Ed said. Don’t milk those curtain calls, he thought. Get on, bow and get off.

The curtain came up again, and there was an even greater roar from the audience. Ed knew the sequence; everybody in, the leads bow individually and in pairs, group bow and off. Curtain down, curtain up ensemble bow, and do it again for as long as they could stretch it. This time the first bow was remarkably short, the second even shorter, but the curtain stayed resolutely down as Ed heard the ladder rattle against the flat clunk into place against the back of the proscenium arch.

“You can let go now,” he said.

“Thank Christ,” Marco groaned and released the belt. Its weight was slight, but it was enough, as it dropped, to destroy the scrim’s fragile grasp on the batten and drop, with a sigh of fabric, right on to the throne. “Now get me the buggery out of here. I need a fuckin’ drink.”

OoO

Marco’s desire for a drink was one that was shared by the cast, crew and the dozens of hangers-on who had appeared indecently quickly. Tony managed to keep most of them out of the dressing rooms, but the Green Room was packed. There was champagne for all, courtesy of the Chancellor of Sydney University, who declared, as Nicci sat in his lap, that he hadn’t had as much fun since he was an undergraduate. There were flowers and gifts and people drifting in and out, and finally Ed managed to yell “The party’s on in the bar! Everybody here is invited.” He had no idea whether that was true or not, but he had to get the people out so that the actors could finish changing, which Nicci hadn’t bothered to do. She was half in Tudor velvets and half in a satin bra.

There was a general exodus to the bar, and Ed breathed a sigh of relief. He had no objection to people in various stages of undress and make-up throwing a party in the Green Room, but it just wasn’t big enough for the general public. Besides, there were things that had to be done before he could shut up

shop for the night, such as organising the props. If he left that until tomorrow half of them would go missing and he'd have to hunt for them.

Henry came up, wiping cold cream from his face, and said "Nice catch up there, old man. I glimpsed it at the change of scene, as I cast my gaze to heaven, seeking inspiration, and to keep an eye on what was happening with that bloody scrim. I hope you don't mind," he continued, "but I let the cast know there was a problem as we came off after the scene, and that they should take their cue for the curtain call from me. We just bowed and fucked off, instead of all that dancing around for the featured players."

"Thanks. It was touch and go up there."

"Well, I'm glad that the little bugger didn't drop from heaven into my lap. I'll have to buy him a drink for his endurance."

"Me too. And I owe you one for quick thinking. Marco's heavier than he looks. I'm going to clean up a bit and go to the bar. I think I need a drink, too."

It didn't take long to collect the props and store them, but the last of the cast had scurried down to the bar by the time it was done. Ed looked around at the emptiness. It still buzzed with excitement, and with more than a hint of sheer relief. He sat down for a breather in one of the old leather chairs that were scattered through the green room. It was as comfortable as only an old, worn leather chair can be, the horsehair stuffing softened by the pressure of a million backsides, the leather stretched to accommodate the shape of a weary back and the arms as tender as kid gloves. All the things that had to happen tomorrow began to run through his head, primary among them fixing that bloody scrim. The stage had to be swept, fridge re-stocked with drinks, get rid of some of those bloody floral arrangements that were clogging the rooms. He closed his eyes and re-lived that moment above the set when he grabbed Marco. Scary. Then he thought of the crashing applause he'd heard while he held on to the gutsy little bugger, and his lips curved into a smile. It was a success. After all the sweat, it was a hit. He started to relax, and his head began to nod.

A touch on his shoulder woke him.

"I wondered where you'd got to," Linda said. "I missed you when you didn't turn up in the bar with everybody else. I figured you'd either succumbed to carnal temptation or you'd fallen asleep, and all the girls were in the bar, and here you were, on the nod in the green room." She held out a drink. "Here, I brought you this." She gave it to him and sat in his lap. "And this is for you, as well." She gave him a long, lingering kiss. "I love you, y'know. You're anally retentive, you worry too much and you don't get enough sleep, and I love you. I must be fucking crazy."

“Probably,” Ed said, taking a sip of his drink. “You did say you’d marry me, didn’t you?”

“Twenty-five cast members and crew can’t be wrong, so I must have.”

“Well, the show’s up, looks like it’s going to be a winner, let’s set a date before the lunacy wears off.”

“Six weeks from tomorrow. Registry office.”

“You’ve looked into this, haven’t you?”

“Yep. I’ve got all the papers back at the hotel. We can get married and be back in time for the show.”

Ed kissed her. “By that time the show will either have settled into a groove or be beyond help. We’re going to take a few days off for a honeymoon.”

She hugged him. “Wow, a fairy tale romance. Where shall we go?”

“Who knows? With six weeks to organise it, we can go anywhere we want to.”

“Right now we’d better go to the bar, or they’ll suspect us of having a celebratory quickie backstage.”

Ed thought for a second, and then shook his head. “Nah. It’d spoil the romance of the occasion.”

“You’re sure? I can rip my knickers off and we can be at it in a bare few moments.”

He kissed her again and dumped her off his lap as he stood up. “Save it for home when we can relax and not be discovered flagrante delecto, you minx.”

“If that’s the way you feel about it, let’s join the party!”

OoO

The party had spilled out of the bar and into the foyer by the time they got there. They forced their way to downstairs through chattering critics and theatrical luvvies to where the cast and crew were centred. Madelyn came up to them as they made it to the bar. She put her arms around Ed and kissed him, much to his surprise. It was somewhat like being smooched by an ashtray. “Thanks Ed,” she said. “Marco told me what happened.”

“Jesus, thank him. I only came in at the last minute. He’s the one who held on for most of the last act.”

Madelyn looked to where Marco was sitting in a booth with Mayne and Barry on one side and Claire on the other. There was what looked like a stein in front of him that held about a quart of beer. “He’s been thanked, and maybe will be thanked some more,” she said. “if Claire has anything to say about it. Get a drink and come join us.”

By the time they got there a couple of tables had been dragged together and people were seated all around them. Along with the people in the booth, Kevin was at one end in deep conversation with Madelyn, Adam and Henry were laughing at something, Leon and Tess were opposite them with Terry next to them. At a separate table a little distance away, the NIDA people were gathered with the chancellor and Nicci and a few of the other academics. Ed and Linda squeezed themselves in next to Terry, who held up a mobile 'phone and pointed at it.

"I just called the hospital," he said.

"How's Greg?" Ed asked.

"He's comfortable, but his knee's totally bugged. He won't be moving around on it for at least a month. He's going to need surgery."

"Poor bugger," Leon said from the other side of Terry, and his voice held genuine sympathy. "I didn't want to get the part this way."

"But you did," Ed said, "and you did a bloody brilliant job." He raised his glass in a toast and downed the beer. It tasted very good.

"Hey, Ed," Adam called across the table, "somebody else did a bloody good job, too." He nudged Henry. "Tell him, Henry."

"I don't wish to blow my own trumpet."

"Go on, there's only the inner circle here." He turned to face Ed and Linda directly. "You know when Deane came up to me last night? After he'd said that it had to be Shakespeare?"

"Yes," Ed said.

"Well the bastard said that the GG had had a quiet word in his ear, and that it was the considered opinion of the Crown that a new Shakespeare play could only be good for the honour and glory of the British state." He took a drink and guffawed. "I couldn't work it out, but I saw Henry and the GG having a quiet chat later, and I fronted him about it. Henry, I mean, not the Governor General. Tell them what you told me."

Henry took a slug of what looked like pure single-malt and cleared his throat. "It was, again, a matter of a few quiet words in a few ears in the right places. That is how these things are handled in the higher echelons, I'm sad to say. Word reached the Royals that there was trouble in the colonies, and the scruffy buggers got on to their Vice-Regal agent out here and let him know that they desired this

play to be attributed to Shakespeare. You can really thank my brother, not me. He's a stuffy prick with the soul of an accountant, but he sometimes demonstrates a truly edged sense of humour."

"Jesus, when's the Royal Command Performance, then?"

Mayne broke in from the end of the table. "Funny you should say that. I had a call *during* the show, from someone purporting to be the Lord Chamberlain, asking us if we were considering bringing the show to London. I told him I'd have to call back tomorrow, because we were just going back in from interval."

Henry spluttered some of his drink. "*You hung up on Earl Peel?*"

"Is that who it was? He was very good about it. Said he'd be available from nine in the morning. Gave me his private number."

Henry shook his head. "God love the Australians," he said. Then "Well are we?"

Mayne shrugged. "Maybe. We're going to run here as long as we can, and Adam suggested that we could take this show on tour and do one of the others from the new scripts. A Shakespeare repertory company. Want the job, Ed?"

"What job?"

"Head of stage management here at the Liz."

"What, you mean sticking with one theatre permanently, stuck in Sydney and having to buy a little cottage somewhere, get a dog and have no more than ordinary problems getting a show on?"

"That's about it."

"Well . . . "

Linda kicked him.

"Yes."

"Good. Madelyn said she didn't want to break in a new stage manager."

"Madelyn?"

"She consented to be the resident director."

"When?"

“I put it to her this afternoon, as soon as she came in, when I had some idea that this thing might work out. You see, Fox Studios have asked to film the production. In fact, they want to film all the productions and put them on cable tv.”

“Holy shit!”

It was as if this news had suddenly spread out to the entire party, because it seemed to climb to a new pitch of jollity. Arthur and his boys were in a corner playing what sounded, to Ed’s ears, like *Give Me Some Lovin’* arranged for crumhorn, viol de gamba, recorder, sackbut and drum. Nicci was dancing to it with abandon, and had reached the point of the evening when she started to loosen her clothes from the heat. So far she’d loosened her shirt all the way down. Claire had grabbed Marco and taken him to the clear space they were using to dance and he was doing something that resembled the Funky Monkey as she glided around sinuously. Most of the reviewers had already left to get their reports in for the morning papers, but a few from radio and television were content to drink the free booze, knowing that they had until their scheduled shows to prepare, by which time they’d probably be over the hangover. The hangers-on had gradually disappeared as their make-up began to wilt and the stage-hands made coarse propositions to them. Madelyn had left Kevin and joined in with the dancers, so Ed went over to him and sat down. He looked bug-eyed.

“How’s it going? You were bloody great on stage tonight.”

Kevin turned his head and stared. “What?”

“Stage. Show. Very good.”

“What? Oh, thanks.”

He still looked distracted “What’s up? You look gobsmacked.”

Kevin gulped, looked at the drink he held and downed it in one go. “Madelyn says I made her cry.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. She said that after act three she had to go to the ladies room and have a cry.” He looked down at his empty glass. “She also said that if I ever gave a performance that was less than that good she’d take a chainsaw to me. Now that I’ve shown what I can do, I have to do it all the time.” He smiled and got up. “Now that I know I can do it, maybe I will be able to do it all the time. I’m getting another drink.”

It was three in the morning, and most of the party had left or passed out and been sent home in taxis. Linda was asleep on one of the couches, Mayne and Barry were trading jokes with Adam and Henry

at the bar, and Marco was sitting with his feet up on a chair. Bruno was lying at his feet, snoring softly. Ed brought a drink across to him and sat down.

“Ta, mate,” he said. “One more of these and I think I’ll make my way home.”

“You did bloody well up there tonight, mate,” Ed said.

“Ta. I feel like I’ve been bloody stretched on a rack. Just make sure you get that fuckin’ scrim fixed by tomorrow.”

“I’ll be in by one, and I’ll fix it personally. You won’t have to hang from the rafters again.”

“Bloody wonderful. I wasn’t cut out to be Tarzan.”

Ed looked around. “You on your own now?”

Marco laughed. “Yeah, mate. Claire found some big tall bloke to go home with. Good luck to both of them. She’s not my type.”

“Oh?”

“Nah. I like the Jersey girls, all rosy-cheeked and shy.” He gestured around him. “They make a change from this mess. I know why it happens,” he said. “You live your life on high-C while you’re on stage; you want to blow off a little steam afterwards.”

“Too true. Some get drunk, some get laid, some just go home and have a cup of tea and a good lie down.”

“I reckon that’s what your girl over there wants.” He pointed to Linda.

Ed looked, and a feeling of contentment spread through him. “Well, you have to give a lady what she wants. Tell Barry or Mayne to lock up when they’re done, will you? For once, I don’t want to be the last one out.”

Marco raised his glass and said “Cheers, mate.”

Ed walked over to Linda’s recumbent form. He knelt by the couch and stroked her hair. Her eyes flickered open. “Come on love, let’s go home.”

She nodded groggily and looked around. “Jesus, the cleaners are going to have a job tomorrow.”

“That they are.”

She gave him a sleepy grin. “It was a fucking great show, wasn’t it?”

“It was that, love, it was that.”

She put her arms around him and kissed him. He raised her to her feet and grabbed her bag from the couch. “And tomorrow,” he said, “we’ve got to do it all again.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“But this time,” he began to steer her to the exit, “without the drama.”

As they walked out from the back lane into Enmore Road to where their car was parked they spotted a paper boy, one of those relics of a bygone age, opening a bundle of freshly delivered newspapers. Ed walked over and bought one, leafing through it as he came back to Linda.

“Are we in it?” she asked.

He nodded and held it up to show her the front page. There was a header box that stated, in bold caps, ‘The Bard Comes Back! Report Arts Liftout!’

“What’s it say?” she said.

Ed read it out, his breath misting in the cool air. “There has been debate, argument and conflict about the production of *Henry VII* at the old Elizabethan Theatre. Was it written by Shakespeare or not? Aye, that was the question, but I really don’t care if it was Will or Uncle Bill; whoever wrote it, the play’s a knockout. Without question, it is the best production to grace any stage in Sydney for decades. It is a sensation.”

Ed stopped reading and grinned at Linda. “We did good, love.”

“Do you think we should go back and tell them?”

Ed looked back at the dark lane, and into the darkness to the stage door and the world inside. He thought of Madelyn, and Henry, and Mayne and Barry and all the others who put their souls on the line to make this imagined world happen, courtesy of a centuries-dead genius.

“Nah,” he said. “Let’s go home.” He folded the paper and put it under his arm, put his other arm around Linda. “They know, love, they know.”

TRUTH, FICTION AND HISTORY.

By Ian Nichols

1. INTRODUCTION

“But it’s the truth, even if it didn’t happen.” (Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 19)

What is the difference between truth and falsehood in fiction? What is the relationship between them in a novel? The paradox expressed by Ken Kesey in his novel lies at the heart of fiction. If we read a novel, we are aware that it is a work of imagination, that it is made up. We are also aware that much of it seems true. The setting of the novel, reactions of the characters, facts of history, are all recognisable, or self evident. The moors of Yorkshire are recognisable in *Wuthering Heights*. The leaden horror the soldiers experience in *All Quiet on the Western Front* is understandable, even for those who have not endured war. The date of the Battle of Waterloo in *Sharpe’s Waterloo* is recorded in contemporary texts. Even in the most extreme fantasies, there are aspects of the text that we can recognise as based on the actual world. The truth that Kesey refers to in his novel is the truth of his lived experience as a psychiatric nurse, which he used to guide his writing. The characters, plot and setting did not exist, except in the possible world that is the novel. He has taken what is real and turned it into a different form of truth in that possible world.

A novel that is in any way based upon an external reality which we believe to be true must meet certain criteria regarding that external reality. A historical novel uses fiction as a form of metalanguage which takes into itself the precepts of history, which is the object language, the original language of statement. This is in accord with Tarski’s concept of Undefinability; the truth of history cannot be defined solely by reference to history, but only by reference to a system which can encode truth and history. Tarski’s theory of Undefinability states, informally, that arithmetical truth cannot be defined in arithmetic (Smith, <http://math.sfsu.edu/smith/Math800/Units/Goedel&Tarski.pdf>). In the same way, historical truth cannot be defined in history. Fiction is a metalanguage capable of expressing the semantics of historical truth and has expressive power exceeding that of the object language. If the statement is ‘History frames the truth,’ this cannot be proved by reference solely to history. However, the truth, or otherwise, of the statement can be demonstrated by a metalanguage that includes history and statements about the truth of history as its object language. It can be argued that the implication of this is that the truth of history is often better expressed in the language of fiction than in history texts. Fiction can form a framework for telling the truth of the real world. The facts of history cannot include fiction, but fiction can include the facts of history. This system provides a framework by

which relationships may be established between facts. It is this relationship which forms truth, rather than the facts themselves, rather like the relationship between story and plot in a novel.

Truth itself has been a subject of conjecture since the beginnings of philosophy. There are many definitions of truth, many criteria for assessing it. These criteria can be equally applied to fiction and non-fiction. There are three main theories of truth; correspondence, coherence and pragmatic. If a fictional construct satisfies the criteria drawn from these theories, it can be said to be truthful, even if it is known to be a fabrication. This creates what Guelev calls a “probability space” (575), where truth can have many meanings, all of them valid, in accord with a many-valued logic or propositional calculus.

The truth of a textual statement is observationally relative and, therefore, has a degree of uncertainty. Some of the statements in a text have a higher degree of probable truth than others, and it is on this basis that we decide whether they are fact or fiction. In the same way, the predominance of probably true statements in a text causes us to decide upon its reliability, whether it can be considered to be fiction or non-fiction. Marie-Laure Ryan has written on this concept in “From Parallel Universes to Possible Worlds: Ontological Pluralism in Physics, Narratology, and Narrative.” She makes the point that:

What makes people think that a statement like ‘If Napoleon had not tried to invade Russia, he would have remained emperor until his death’ contains more truth than ‘If Napoleon had ridden a black horse into Moscow, he would have remained emperor until his death?’ As we shall see below, there is a close connection between the truth conditions of counterfactuals and those of interpretive statements concerning fictional worlds. (Ryan, 644)

The point that Ryan refers to is that two worlds can be accessible to each other if they share the same laws of nature (nomological accessibility), when the “History of the second world can be entirely contemplated from the point in time occupied by the first world. This eliminates novels of anticipation but not historical novels” (645). This is vital when considering the possible worlds that both history and historical fiction represent, and the third category of contemporary fiction which, obviously, shares the same nomological accessibility with the contemporary world as historical fiction does with history.

Despite the way in which books are often classified, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between fact and fantasy. In the field of historical fiction, this differentiation becomes even more difficult, and even experts can be fooled, as was the case with the first *Flashman* novel.¹ It is little wonder then that the actual distinction between fact and fantasy, between truth and fiction seems

¹ See: Fox, Margolit. “George MacDonald Fraser, Author of *Flashman* Novels, Dies at 82.” *The New York Times*, 3rd January, 2008, p 33 for a more detailed account of Fraser and his life, including fooling the experts.

often to be blurred in the genre of the historical novel. Any book that is based on history must contain facts verifiable by reference to external sources. If it is fiction, a novel, it must also contain the products of imagination. The problem for the reader still exists; how to tell one from the other.

A further problem is whether a novel can be considered a reliable source in its portrayal of history. A novel contains invention, but the invention may not contradict history, instead it may amplify our understanding of it. Historical texts themselves are, to a certain extent, products of invention, since they make a narrative, with a beginning, middle and end, from an ongoing process. Unless we assume the author has the godlike power of infallibility, the accuracy of historic texts is based on probability, not certainty. Both fictional and factual texts are permeable, one into the other. Facts are used in fiction, and the techniques of fiction in factual accounts. The degree of truth in a text, and how it is used, depends on the text. Sparshott, in his essay "Truth in Fiction," discusses this concept as it applies to many sorts of fiction, including historical novels, detective stories and science fiction, and comes to the conclusion that all, unavoidably, contain a degree of truth (3 - 7).

The novel which forms the main part of this thesis, *The Bloodiest Rose*, is an attempt to use fiction in two ways, to frame two different truths. The first truth is that of lived experience, wherein the text describes the mounting of a theatrical production. The second is that of history, the fiction providing a framing narrative for the facts of William Shakespeare's writing and times. This exegesis will attempt to demonstrate that the novel satisfies the criteria for a truthful text. As part of this attempt it will examine a successful historical novel series, the Flashman series, and will delineate the criteria for truth and how they can be applied to both the Flashman series and *The Bloodiest Rose*. It will also discuss how the writing of history itself can be seen as a form of narrative, where the historiographic construction uses the tropes of fiction. The essential question that this thesis examines is how fiction can be truthful, even if what it describes never happened.

2. TRUTH AND FICTION

Any consideration of fiction must also consider truth and the way in which narratives of both fact and fiction are constructed. In a novel, fact, fiction, truth and falsehood are related, where the binary relationships are those of fact opposed to fiction and truth opposed to falsehood. The implication of this is that facts are always true, and fiction is always a falsehood. If a fact can be defined as objective reality, then anything which contradicts objective reality is a falsehood, a fiction. However, objective reality rests upon verification, upon the existence and accuracy of records or observation, and these may not always be reliable. The point of view of the observer and their reliability must be taken into consideration. This is particularly necessary in the discussion of fiction which relates to the historical record. History is not something which can be validated experimentally, which is one test of the truth of a statement, and it is sometimes difficult to appeal to authority for validation, since authorities often differ.

It is problematic to assess the truth of a text, since texts can be presented as truthful when they are not. There are primary truths; existence, non-contradiction and the ability of the mind to know the truth. These are self-evident truths that must exist before the truth of a statement can be either proved or disproved, and so are not able to be proved; they are axiomatic: I think, therefore I am. Truth is a quality of judgements and premises, not arguments. As Paolo Casalegno has argued, "We can say that certain inference schemata are valid because whenever premises of the forms specified by the schemata are true, the corresponding conclusions are true, as well" (279 - 280). As such, truth must have a relationship with reality, an agreement of its premise or judgement, whereas arguments may be valid, but remain untrue. Dolhenty argues that there is a clear distinction between objective and subjective truth, but that propositions based on both can be considered truthful statements (<http://www.radicalacademy.com/epistom.htm>). This is the case with alternate reality fiction, wherein the premise has no agreement with reality (warships from the future are sent back in time to the middle of WWII, as happens in John Birmingham's *Weapons of Choice*, for instance). The arguments which are developed from this false premise may be valid, but untrue; the ships, with their advanced nuclear weapons and stealth technology utterly change the balance of the war. In the same Birmingham novel, the attitudes towards gender roles in the 1940s are an accurate reflection of those which existed at the time. They survive the coherence test of truth, and so the arguments developed from them may be both valid and true; the allied soldiers are astounded by the liberal attitudes expressed by the female soldiers from the future.

To estimate truthfulness, one can use tests for correspondence, coherence and pragmatism. In the first, a truthful statement will correspond with the observed world or its records. For example;

'Shakespeare was born in 1564' is verifiable with reference to the records of birth in Stratford-Upon-Avon for that year. Coherence is demonstrated when a statement fits into a set of propositions without contradiction. For example; 'Shakespeare may have had a close friendship with Christopher Marlowe' is a statement which, while unprovable by reference to the record, is consistent with other statements about Shakespeare and his times and the society in which he was likely to have moved as a working playwright. The pragmatic test of truth is simply whether a statement works within its context. Another example; 'A production of a previously undiscovered Shakespeare play, written in his own hand, would attract worldwide attention.'

All these tests may be applied to texts whether they are factual or fictional. Readers, some consciously, others unconsciously, will automatically apply these tests to the reliability of what they read. They may use others such as emotion or custom, which are not accurate tests. On the principle of these tests they will decide whether a text is reliable – truthful – or not. But even then, there may be uncertainty:

The standard theory of truth – which I have found unsatisfactory – has us look at our revisions of belief as if they were modelled by a puzzle with a unique solution. On that view we seek truth values that are fixed for once and for all; and our changes in belief are just changes in our estimates of where the truth lies. (Ullian, 64)

What Ullian says is important for the novelist, specifically whether the reader believes in the truth of the novel or not. The novelist creates a possible world, one which contains elements of truth and of fact. This is because the novelists themselves, and their text, are products of their surrounding world, one which is composed of both truth and falsehood. Truth, in its essence, is a semantic concept, a theory of belief. A text is truthful or not if the reader believes it to be so.

If a text relates its story to an event in history, then it is operating in a world of references to fact, or correspondence. However, the story, even if based on hard fact, will involve a type of manufactured narrative. The writer of history uses the references, the facts, to construct a story, and this involves using the same techniques as fiction. The relationship between the facts is constructed, not natural. It is based on the interpretation of how facts relate to each other, and this depends as much on the historian as it does on the history. As Bernard Cornwell says in his essay at the end of *Sharpe's Waterloo*, "French accounts of the battle describe Waterloo as a glorious French victory that somehow went awry at the last minute" (375).

A fictional story, in fact, is a metatext that contains the factual record. History is not a story with a beginning, middle and end, but a continuous series of events; a historical continuum, rather than a set

of discrete or overlapping narratives. Hayden White states the relationship between history and fiction this way:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by finding, identifying or uncovering the stories that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between history and fiction resides in the fact that the historian finds his stories, whereas the fiction writer invents his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which invention also plays a part in the historian's operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motifical characterization of the set to which it belongs. (White, 6)

As White points out, some part of the historian's writing relies on invention as well. For some things there simply is no record, but an educated guess might serve the same purpose, and be equally accurate. It could be stated that, at the Battle of Waterloo, there were English troops who were afraid when they saw Napoleon's undefeated Imperial Guard advance on their position. This is an educated guess which has the resonance of truth. It meets the test of coherence; it fits in with what we believe about people when faced with extreme danger. There is evidence to support the contention, such as that Wellington's troops were, by his own admission, inexperienced and ill-prepared; "an infamous army, very weak and ill-equipped, and a very inexperienced Staff" (Longford, 485). Napoleon's were all experienced volunteers (Barbero, 75). Further evidence could be found by an analysis of shots fired and casualties experienced, which would give rise to the rate of fire and the rate of hits, balanced against the inexperience of the British army. But still these would not prove the contention beyond doubt; such things rely on fallible humans to do the counting, and counts taken immediately after the battle may lack validity. The statement cannot be proved to be truthful with reference to correspondence. There is no record of any statistical analysis of the state of mind of British troops at the moment of attack. Even the records of casualties might be questioned since the casualties were recorded the day after the battle, and may not be absolutely accurate. But the statement regarding their fear seems so self-evident that the inverse would seem to be utter fiction. This is a first insight into the probabilistic nature of textual truth; "The idea that reality – the sum total of what exists – may include other worlds than the world that we experience every day ranks near the very top of the topics that fascinate the human mind" (Ryan, *Parallel Universes*, 634). There are some things which are so common-sense that they ring true, even if there is no direct evidence for them or any way to demonstrate their documented truth.

The historical novel

At its simplest, a historical novel is a novel set in the past. The Historical Novel Society defines it as being written at least fifty years after the events described, or by someone who was not alive at the time of the events described, and therefore approached only by research. Nathan Uglow has defined the historical novel as an attempt to meld drama and a strong plot along with characterisation which accords with “credible human psychology” (214). This takes place in a setting that is recognisable and specific. It relies on the actual components of the period. Characters specific to the time are used, as are cultural customs, costume, locations, speech and typical foods (Uglow, 214).

While Uglow’s definition gives a general outline of the historical novel, it may be that it is too broad and therefore problematic. Such novels as *The Clan of the Cave Bear* or *Catch-22* could be defined as a historical novel in Uglow’s terms, although the former is more akin to fantasy, and the latter a satire. Georg Lukács, in *The Historical Novel*, defines the genre more closely. He puts forward the proposition that the historical novel in its present form did not exist prior to Sir Walter Scott. His concept is that history, true history, as expressed in a historical novel, must be consistent with the time of the novel.

The historical novel therefore has to *demonstrate* by *artistic* means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way. What in Scott has been called very superficially ‘authenticity of local colour’ is in actual fact this artistic demonstration of historical reality. It is the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals. (Lukács, 45)

According to Lukács, history, in the novel, cannot be altered. The events and destinies must retain their importance and fate, in order for the writer to produce “human and artistic truth” (350) in recounting the history. The idea that these are a separate *type* of truth, distinct from objective truth, is very important to any estimation of a novel’s truthfulness and reliability. The historical novel, in order to be truthful, must be consistent with both its historical subject and with its fictional narrative.

What constitutes a historical novel can be problematic. A novel set in the early days of the Vietnam War may be on the border of the historical/contemporary novel. One set in Elizabethan England is certainly a historical novel, whereas one set at the turn of the 21st century is certainly a contemporary novel. One of the questions which this thesis addresses in its major fictional component is whether a contemporary novel based on an event which took place centuries ago, may provide the same historical credentials as a classic historical novel. This is what *The Bloodiest Rose* does in placing the narrative in today’s world, but using the events of history as its basis.

The novel rests on the concept that Shakespeare’s complete works, in his own hand, are discovered, and that among them is a play of which there is no record whatsoever, *Henry VII*. Why this should be

so is part of the initial possible world that provides a basis for the main story. A possible world is one which could have existed, but did not, or cannot be proved to have existed. They are “constructs of the mind” (Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, 19). In Ryan’s taxonomy of possible worlds (19), *The Bloodiest Rose* is a hypothetical: Would Shakespeare have written *Henry VII*? He wrote *Richard III* and *Henry VIII*. The reign of Henry VII was filled with incident, including rebellions, wars, the death of Arthur, his heir, and the political machinations necessary for Henry, his second son, to be permitted to marry Arthur’s wife. Given the drama of Henry VII’s reign, it is more of a mystery why Shakespeare did *not* write this play. *The Bloodiest Rose* suggests there were reasons that Shakespeare did write the play, and yet why it was never performed. It is suggested it was written as a form of revenge after Marlowe’s murder, and never performed because it would have led to Shakespeare’s arrest. The novel attempts to construct a truth for which there is no evidence, in a possible world which, while hypothetical, is identifiable with the historical world from which it is drawn.

Linda Hutcheon argues that, in postmodernist terms, there is no single truth, only truths, and that the interaction between metafiction and historiography rejects questions of authenticity. Instead, rewriting the past opens it up to the present, and prevents it from “being conclusive and teleological” (Hutcheon, 110). Hutcheon applies this to historiography and its meta-analysis of the writings of past historians and the records of history, but the statement could equally apply to historical fiction. A story of a soldier in the Battle of Waterloo could pay scrupulous attention to the details of the historical record yet invent the feelings of the soldier. This could be broadly labelled as ‘historical fiction,’ yet that does not accurately describe the possible world it inhabits. A work of history is seen as reliable. A work of fiction seems more unreliable as a genuine record of the world. It could be argued that both portray a version of the real world since both are, inevitably, drawn from the real world. Terry Eagleton argues that a writer is embedded in and draws on their culture and society in order to create a textual world. He points out that the generation of a literary work is not any mysterious inspiration, or explained by the psychology of the author. Authors live in a culture from which they derive their ways of seeing the world from the dominant social mentality “or ideology of an age” (Eagleton, 6). They are informed, in their view of the world, by that which is around them, the totality of their experience, which may include things which have passed before, and the work they produce is the enunciation not alone of a narrative but of this world view.

In both *The Bloodiest Rose* and the *Flashman* series, which forms a model for the novel’s recursive structure, the authenticity of a monoglossic reading of both history and the contemporary world is questioned. In both *Flashman* and *The Bloodiest Rose*, possibilities are offered which can be seen as equally authentic as those of recorded history. There is no evidence that Shakespeare did not write *Henry VII*, and that it remained unproduced. Equally, there is no evidence that recorded history would

have differed in any way from what is expressed in the Flashman series if the character had actually existed and the events he describes had happened the way they are described in the series.

Authors use the world that exists to create a world that is not, but is a possible world. In light of this it seems that all texts which reference history are, to a greater or lesser extent, a combination of that which can be verified by reference to external sources and that which is invented. They are a form of hybrid text. The supposed truth which is intermingled with the supposed non-truth has only a probability of accuracy, as the fiction has a likelihood of inaccuracy. A statement about a fictional character who reacts angrily to the Great Depression, as in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, makes the reader believe in it as truth even though the reader knows that the book is fiction. It is a reliable rewriting of the past, and so serves the same purpose as objective fact. If this is so, the identification of a text as factual or fictional becomes even more problematic.

The continuum between what we perceive as fiction and what we perceive as non-fiction is one which is filled with indeterminacy. There is the philosophical problem of what constitutes actuality and how it is represented in texts. There is the more pragmatic problem of perception, how readers apprehend both the real world and textual worlds. In historical fiction, there is the problem that events may be influenced by things not perceived or recorded, which may only be the subject of imaginative speculation. It may also be that what was originally a work of the imagination may become interpreted as fact: "Fictionality and actuality can be relativized to a cultural perspective (legends about Greek gods were presumably treated as versions of reality by people in ancient Greece)" (Ronen, 76). This could be applied to any mythology, any religious system, or even systems of science which have since become unfounded or overtaken by successive discovery. In writing of astrology, Isaac Asimov states that it "Started off as the best science of all," and that "No scholar can be maligned for being wrong in the light of the knowledge of a later period. If he strives for knowledge in the terms of his own time he is a member of the brotherhood of science" (15).

The difference between fact and fiction is also problematic. Kai Mikkonen says, "Obviously, if anything could be read as fiction, or fiction as fact, the very distinction between the two would also lose its meaning" (291). If the distinction between fiction and fact is preserved they can be seen as binary opposites. However, defining them in this way, so that fact becomes 'that which is not fiction,' and fiction becomes 'that which is not fact,' only points out that each is defined by reference to the other; they inhere. Mikkonen sees that the defining characteristics of fictional texts are rather the information a reader gathers regarding the text's genre, those qualities that establish the way in which we "first classify and then read some texts as fiction" (291). We, as readers, have experience with a range of texts and that experience leads us to define those texts as fiction or not. Where we stand determines what we see, and how we interpret it, particularly in terms of its intent. Our experience,

our prejudices or our ignorance, as well as the way in which something is presented, may determine whether we interpret something as fact or fiction. A news article is seen as factual, a cartoon in a newspaper as fictional. However, a news article may represent opinion or prejudice as much as it does factuality, and a cartoon may be an equal interpretation of factuality, expressed differently. Mikkonen argues, “Crucial in determining the text’s status vis-à-vis fact and fiction are the conception of the narrator’s or the speaker’s intention and the audience’s generic expectations” (291). Texts such as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and William Carlos Williams’ *In the American Grain*, an alternative history of the United States, are regarded as fiction even though their documentation of historical and social facts is accurate. On the other hand, Jules Michelet’s *Histoires de la France* is treated as history, even though there are elements within it which are invented.

Marie-Laure Ryan has pointed out that the narrator is always placed in the Textual Actual World (TAW) which has a relationship with the Actual World (AW) (“Possible Worlds,” 553 - 576). If the narrator’s intention is crucial to determining factuality or fictionality, what is the status of a narrator who is a fictional construct? We can adopt the concept of the speaker being both the speaker embedded within the narrative and the implied speaker of authorship. In that case, the fictionality of one, the embedded speaker, is clear, but the status of the implied authorial speaker is unclear. Their intentions are also unclear. These may be treated as implicit in the text, but it is difficult to determine the nature of authorial intention. One reader may interpret a text’s intention quite differently from another, so that the works of P.G. Wodehouse may be interpreted by one reader as intended to be light comedy, purely for entertainment, and by another as intended to valorise a vanishing and unpopular class of idle rich.²

Even in the case of an autobiography, the position of the narrator cannot be other than in the Textual Actual World. In many cases, such as in Clive James’ *Unreliable Memoirs*, the writer admits that the narrative is not, and cannot, be utterly accurate. James clearly states, “This autobiography is a disguised novel . . . the whole affair is a figment got up to sound like the truth” (9). James’ autobiography directly addresses the potential reader, letting them know their position relative to any understanding of the text, that it is both factual and fictional. The techniques, the language of fiction, surrounds the facts and amplifies them, doing what the facts of James’ life could not do on their own. The text, whether it is fact or fiction, truth or lies, exists in a superpositional state similar to that of Schrödinger’s Cat. The text is indeterminate; it could be either truth or fiction. This binary superpositional state will be collapsed by the act of reading in the same way that the superpositional state of the cat, whether it is alive or dead, becomes determined through the act of opening its box. Any text has similar qualities. In order for it to be determined as truth or fiction, it must be read, and

² When Wodehouse was recommended for a Companion of Honour in 1967, he was denied it on the grounds that his most famous creation, Bertie Wooster, preserved a caricature that was detrimental to modern Britain.

then weighed in the judgment of the reader. The reader's experiences, knowledge, genre expectations and credulity will determine whether the text is perceived as fact or fiction, and this may differ from reader to reader.

For instance, Immanuel Velikovsky's 1950 book *Worlds in Collision* purports to be a scholarly work of non-fiction, presenting a theory that the events of the Old Testament can be explained, literally, by science. It puts forward the theory that Venus was a comet that interacted with both Jupiter and the Earth, causing such events as stopping the rotation of the Earth and a rain of Manna. The book was soon proved to be the merest of fictions, as has been the case with other such pseudo-scientific books. For example, Isaac Asimov mounted a serious rebuttal of Velikovsky in his article "Worlds in Confusion" in *The Stars in Their Courses*.

Readers may engage with a text in such a way that belief is suspended for the duration of the act of reading, so that they enter the world of the text, the TAW. The truth of the text is determined by its consistency within the TAW. When the reader withdraws from the created, possible world of the text the consistency within the TAW will affect whether the text is perceived as fact or fiction. Mikkonen supports this when he says that reading is an action wherein an ontological double standard is often applied, to move between ontological assumptions and expectations (304). When reading historical fiction, the reader knows that it is fiction, yet that it refers to real events. For any work of fiction, the reader can move into the belief that the fiction represents the real world, rather than simply a textual world. It is as if the text cannot be collapsed into true or untrue by the act of reading, but continues to remain in a superpositional state, where the text is both things at once, incapable of resolution. It is a hybrid text that consists of elements that are both actual and elements that are created, but which does not become a tincture of one diluted by the other:

If we imagine fiction as white and nonfiction as black, the analog interpretation describes hybrid texts as homogenous shades of gray, while the digital interpretation views them as more or less finely grained combinations of black and white elements. (Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 52)

Both are distinct, as if the text is a blend of black and white sand, which appears grey, but wherein the elements of composition never lose their distinct qualities.

Historical novels are exemplars of Mikkonen's ontological double standard and of the relationship between the Textual Actual World and the Actual World, since they operate with reference to two frames; the made-up world of the text and the objective world described by other texts. The fictional world may refer to the actual only as a starting point, and then either modify or deny events. Azhar Abid's *Passarola Rising* takes an actual personage of the eighteenth century and ascribes to him

adventures that are not only unrecorded in the competing non-fiction referring to that period, but impossible. It becomes an alternative history, rather than purely a historical novel. It builds on what is known of the characters, politics and events of the times, the possible shifts and changes which may have occurred under slightly differing circumstances. These are the very things to which Michel Foucault refers when he says “What archaeology wishes to uncover primarily – in the specificity and distance maintained in various discursive formations – [are the] the play of analogies and differences at the level of rules of formation” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 178). It is within fiction, as a metatext, that this sort of play, these experiments to create and develop meaning, can take place. The ‘rules of formation’ of which Foucault speaks can be made up by the author.

History can only be seen as an attempt to come into contact with the Textual Actual World. As White has pointed out, it uses some of the techniques of fiction, to a greater or lesser extent, to form the linkages which cause history to be more than a simple list of events. No matter how closely a text resembles the “real world,” it can only ever be an approximation of it. This is supported by Ryan in *Avatars of Story*, in talking of the work of Barthes: “History masks its inability to reach the real by creating, through narrative, a ‘reality effect’” (48). By this, Barthes argues that the reality of the created narrative is greater for the reader than the reality of that upon which the narrative is based: history. This is exactly the point upon which fiction rests, that it can take the ‘real’ world, and make it more real.

History and fiction were not always considered to be separate disciplines, but the rise of Leopold von Ranke’s concept of “scientific history” led to their separation in the twentieth century. Hutcheon has pointed out that postmodern theory challenges this separation, and examines what the two forms of writing share, rather than their differences. It challenges the assumptions upon which the two terms rest, in that, if both history and fiction are narrative in structure, these similarities may, in fact, be more important than any differences. The hybrid structure already discussed exists in both forms of text, giving them a shared appearance even if, on closer examination, the proportion of fact and fiction varies from case to case. To continue the analogy of mixed sand used before, there may be more white grains than black in the mix, or vice versa, but the sand, from a distance, still appears grey: “The ordinary reader simply accepts the text as part fiction, part truth” (Ryan, *Avatars*, 54).

It is problematic to determine where the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction exist and whether the reader actually can distinguish truth and fiction. Thomas Pavel, in *Fictional Worlds*, shows that there are “*Demarcational* questions regarding the possibility of establishing sharp boundaries between fiction and non-fiction” (12). He draws this observation from a discussion of the passage which opens chapter two in Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers*, where Mr Pickwick opens his window to see the world beneath:

The reader of this passage experiences two contradictory intuitions: on the one hand he knows well that unlike the sun, whose actual existence is beyond doubt, Mr. Pickwick and most of the human beings and states of affairs described in the novel do not and never did exist outside its pages. On the other hand, once Mr. Pickwick's fictionality is acknowledged, happenings inside the novel are vividly felt as possessing some sort of reality of their own, and the reader can fully sympathise with the adventures and reflections of the characters. (Pavel, 11)

Historically, there are two approaches to the preservation of a distinction between fiction and non-fiction; analog and digital. Analog sees fiction and non-fiction as two poles of a continuum, with no definite boundary between the two. The digital approach sees fiction and non-fiction as being separated by a clearly marked boundary. Ryan argues that, "The analog interpretation describes hybrid texts as homogenous shades of gray, while the digital interpretation views them as more or less finely grained combinations of black and white elements" (*Avatars*, 52). One way of dealing with these combined elements is to deny that there is a distinction, what Ryan has called the "Doctrine of Panfictionality" ("Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality," 165 - 187). However, as Ryan points out, facts not only have a linguistic presence; in non-fiction texts, they also refer to a world that possesses an extratextual existence. As Ryan puts it, "Fictional texts are automatically true of their reference world, but nonfictional texts must establish their truth in competition with other texts that describe the same world" (*Avatars*, 51). The further removed a book becomes from the Actual World (AW), the more it becomes fantasy or alternate history, rather than historical fiction.

3. ALTERNATE HISTORY

If Ryan's concept of a third, hybrid condition is valid for the continuum between fiction and non-fiction, it may be that it is also valid for a continuum between alternate history/alternate world and historical fiction. A text such as Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* could be clearly seen as an alternate world story, while Ronald Basset's *Dando on Delhi Ridge* is clearly a historical novel. The former posits the existence of dragons coexistent with humanity in a history which is largely familiar to us, wherein these dragons are used as weapons in the Napoleonic wars. The latter is a novel which tells the story of Joseph Dando of the 60th Rifles getting involved from the outset of the Indian Mutiny in Meerut in 1857. *Temeraire* presents us with a world wherein there has been a clear and obvious break with the known world far in the past, whereas *Dando* remains true to the historic record in detail, apart from the invented character of Dando himself as an observer of events. Other forms of alternate history occupy a field between these two examples. If these texts can be so positioned, is there a clear-cut dividing line between the categories of alternate history as historical fiction and alternate history per se, or is there, as one progresses along the continuum, a gradual change without any definite, stable boundary? The availability of the third, hybrid category is a valid alternative seen in historical and alternate world fiction. It is as if Schrödinger's Cat can remain as a superposition, or, rather, Schrödinger's 'Text' can remain meaningful as both fact and fiction. The reader's trust in the text as a reference is modified by the knowledge of the text's dual status, where factual and fictional statements coexist, as Ryan puts it, in a checkerboard. Visualising historic fiction as a checkerboard of this type presents the advantage that this view explains how a reader can learn exact factual knowledge about the world of experience and record from a work which is categorised universally as fictional. Some statements will be understood by the reader to be true in both the real world and the world of the text, while others are only true in the fictional world (Ryan, *Avatars*, 53). It follows from this that an alternate history can still be seen as a form of historical novel, even if most of the statements only refer to the fictional world.

It is this dual nature of the text that allows readers to distinguish between the squares of Ryan's checkerboard. We can see that while Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are fictional characters, the London in which they exist is not fictional. While 221b Baker Street did not exist as an address, other features of the London setting – Charing Cross Station, Scotland Yard, London Bridge, and so forth – are verifiable by references external to the stories, the Actual World as opposed to reference to the Textual Actual World in which they exist as part of the structure. Lubomir Dolezel states the idea this way:

The author creating a literary fictional world draws on the actual world in many ways: adopting its elements, categories, and macrostructural models; borrowing “brute facts,” “cultural realemies” (Even-Zohar, 1980; see also McHale, 1987, 86), or “discursive features” (Moser, 1984); “anchoring” the fictional story to a historical event (Wolterstoff, 1980, 189); sharing “frames of reference” (Hrushovski, 1984, 100); “corroborating” the thematic design (Foley, 1986, 14); and so on. (Dolezel, 20)

The upshot of this survey of methods and techniques is that every fictional text, from the most intensely researched example of ‘faction’ – works that attempt to portray a real incident as accurately as possible – to the most esoteric fantasy has, and must have, a relationship with the world external to the text. For the novel based on historic events, these are the verifiable facts of history, to the extent that they can be verified. For the contemporary novel these are the streets that can be walked to the destinations in the text. Walking down George Street in Sydney from Central Station will inevitably take you to Circular Quay, in fact as well as in fiction. One can catch a bus from Central Station which will take you to the University of Sydney. Historical facts may be learned as well. Christopher Marlowe’s death was recorded as occurring in May, 1593. Henry Wriothesley died in November, 1624. A novel which presents Marlowe’s death as occurring in 1585, when he was at Cambridge, or Wriothesley’s death in 1630, is creating an alternate history, and must invent the textual principle by which the TAW diverges from the AW. However, “These free, imaginative transformations create an absurd, carnivalesque and politically aggressive fictional history . . . Yet the carnivalization of history can be written and read only against the background of historical facts” (Dolezel, 158). Even a historical novel which adheres strictly to the facts of the record is fiction; an alternate history. Karen Hellekson says of the alternate history genre that it concerns itself with history turning out differently. These alternate histories are not fantasies, because they rely on realistic attempts to predict what would happen in our familiar world if certain events in history had turned out differently. She believes that “The alternate history concerns itself with plausible causal relationships, and as such, it concerns itself with narrative and time” (Hellekson, 248). The most popular areas for speculation are the turning points in history, often wars. The effect of an alternate outcome to a battle or a war is that it can easily change the course of history, thus creating the alternate history.

Historical novels, alternative and alternate histories share aspects of their narrative and fictional qualities. The essential principle, that things happened differently at some time in history, or in some way of which we have no record, can be extended to great events, such as differing results for wars or the invention of a device long before it really happened, or to relatively minor events, such as a ‘Person from Porlock’ not interrupting Samuel Taylor Coleridge as he was working on *Kublai Khan*. Ruth Ronen contends that different actual and possible states are part of a single world, a continuous

logical space (49). She elaborates on David Sanford's statement: "the different possible worlds we talk about are usually all this single world under the different aspects of the ways it might have been" (Sanford, 162) by pointing out that "the general idea that the plurality of worlds takes place within one world is true for both actualists and philosophers" (Ronen, 49). Historical fiction is a field of the probabilistic uncertainties of events in actuality. Its possible worlds are actualised as fiction but, nevertheless, are part of a conjunction between fiction and non-fiction, as are the possible worlds of alternate histories; the single world that Ronen and Sanford mention which is created by this conjoinment.

It is possible for a novel to explore the constructed relationship between fiction and the historical record with relative freedom. Hutcheon has discussed such texts, which use self-reflective and self-referential techniques, as "historiographical metafiction" (122). A novel such as Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*, where a time traveller goes back into history to discover the truth about Christ, only to find that the actual son of Joseph and Mary suffers from a congenital intellectual disorder, is such a text. The novel investigates the nature of the miraculous and religious, including the final symbol of the crucifixion. The narrative uses analepsis and memory to explain the protagonist Glogauer's desire to discover the truth about Christ. These are placed against the ongoing biblical episodes, where Glogauer reiterates the experiences attributed to them. While it is science fiction, because it involves time-travel, it also fulfills the requirements Hutcheon has indicated for a historiographic metafiction.

The narrative task for writers of both fact and fiction is to explore the difference that such a change would make, and the task for the alternate historical novelist is to credential both the change and the effects that follow. Truth in fact or fiction is not a thing which possesses absolute clarity; it is a matter more of probability than of certainty. The reader makes decisions about the truth of a statement with regard to its probability and, as in a legal argument, evidence can be introduced to make a statement more convincing. A text can be both true and untrue, both fact and fiction. However, texts do not contain only a single narrative. The story of a historic event can, and in fiction almost always is, accompanied by a human story about the characters involved. The two stories relate to each other, but are not the same story. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* tells both the story of the 1855 June Rebellion and Jean Valjean. Thus, a text can be Ryan's checkerboard, composed of both truth and untruth. However, these are not the narratives and metanarratives discussed by Lyotard as clouding narrative elements (xxiv - xxv), but actual stories which take place simultaneously within the text. The story of the June Rebellion forms a framing narrative for the story of Jean Valjean, as the black sections of Ryan's checkerboard can be seen to form a framing narrative for the white ones.

In the case of historical fiction, which rests upon concrete facts, it is inevitable that it will contain statements with a high degree of probability, and thereby create a greater impression of reliability for

the reader. A statement such as “The Duke of Wellington died the night before the Battle of Waterloo and his place was taken by a double who went on to live his life” makes for an interesting story concept, but has a low degree of probability. The statement “The Prince of Belgium was shot by an allied soldier who was disgusted by his poor leadership”³ has a higher degree of probability, since we *can* verify that his leadership was poor, and he did, in fact, sacrifice men unnecessarily. He was shot during the course of the battle and allied troops sometimes killed bad officers. It is circumstantial evidence, but verifiable. The evidence for the first statement is non-existent, but *cannot be disproved*, and a historical novel could be based on the premise, even though the novel would be more likely to be seen as alternate history. It is a coherent explanation of the facts, and, as such, meets one of the tests for truthfulness. Where the evidence of history becomes less certain, there is more free play for the novelist, but only within certain bounds. It is reasonable to construct a novel based on uncertainties in Richard III’s involvement with the Princes in the Tower, but not to give him machine guns for the battle scenes. It would constitute an impossible history, because it directly contradicts the record, and, in this case, would be an alternate history, rather than a historical novel.

While there has been criticism of the ‘deficit’ model of historical novel writing, where the writer “Supplies the interiority or atmosphere deemed to be missing from history, or manufactures actual historical events that lack the necessary proofs to count as history” (Nelson, <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/>>), the model of history on which this argument is based is an inflexible one. The possibility of error on the part of the historian is ignored, even in problematic arenas of inadequate records. The fact is that history has gaps, and these gaps are fair game for the historical novelist. No-one knows the actual sources of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Indeed, it is unlikely that the play, unlike the majority of Shakespeare’s plays, had a source other than in his own imagination; “Much of the play comes from folk tales and myths, largely drawn, as are the artisans, from Shakespeare’s own Warwickshire” (Nichols, 30). But this lack of knowledge allows speculation, as it does for other gaps in history for which there is little, or no evidence, or the evidence is questionable. Such a gap is the Shakespeare Authorship Question, which plays a part in *The Bloodiest Rose*. The majority of critics and Shakespearean scholars hold the belief that the Shakespeare of the plays and poems is William Shakespeare of Stratford-Upon-Avon. A lengthy discussion of the probability of Shakespeare’s authorship, along the lines of strict legal argument, is contained in Ward Elliott and Robert J. Valenza’s “Oxford by the numbers: What are the Odds That the Earl of Oxford Could Have Written Shakespeare’s Poems and Plays?” (323 - 453). Some scholars are not, however, satisfied by the available evidence. But, as James Shapiro points out, most Shakespeare scholars and historians consider it a fringe belief (2 - 4). Shakespeare did not leave a paper trail which indicated

³ As occurs in the Bernard Cornwell novel, *Sharpe’s Waterloo*, where Sharpe himself, after the Prince has destroyed three regiments by his inept leadership, shoots him from cover.

his literary works. The only concrete records of his life are those of baptism, marriage, death, tax, lawsuits and real estate. There exists no documentary record of his education, but his plays display a great breadth of learning, as Kenneth Muir states in *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (1 - 12). There is little known of his association with other figures of the time, even Christopher Marlowe, whose death received an epigraph in one of his plays: "... A great reckoning in a little room" (*As You Like It*, Act 3, Scene 3). There is little to explain his apparently intimate knowledge of Elizabethan and Jacobean politics and the goings-on at court. Many other writers are mentioned as the real Shakespeare, including Marlowe, who died in 1593, and Edmund Spenser, who died in 1599, both before many of the plays were written. Speculation about the authorship of the Shakespeare plays has provided a fertile field for both theorising and fiction. There are alternate histories, such as Harry Turtledove's *Ruled Britannia*, where Shakespeare and Marlowe play a part in overthrowing Spanish rule in England, and re-imaginings, such as a translation into Klingon, with Shakespeare being a Klingon himself in *The Klingon Hamlet* (Nicholas and Strader).

In his review of Dorit Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction*, Craig Stephen Cravens examines the problematic nature of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. He points out that Aristotle was the beginning of the long list of apologists for imaginary works of literature that had a serious nature, and attempted to convey this to their readers by many different means. In the nineteenth century, the 'authentic' nature of the text was often demonstrated by prefacing novels with evidence that was intended to prove their authenticity; the 'lost document' technique. A manuscript found in a desk drawer or a lost diary were not so much intended to demonstrate the authenticity of a text to a reader but to have the reader approach them with the same serious consideration as works that were non-fiction. As Cravens writes, "For although not true in the historical sense, fiction has always laid claim to its own kind of idiosyncratic 'truth'" (41).

The claim to a different kind of truth to which Cravens refers is vital to understanding what might be called the truth of fiction. Fiction can be 'true' in the sense that it obeys the rules by which we judge truth in non-fiction, primary among these that it should not offend our sense of the real world. To a very great extent this comes down to the skill of the fiction writer. If the characters are believable, if the plot is one which does not rub against the grain of history and if the setting is one which is imagined in accord with the real world, the reader will experience the truth of fiction as being equal to the truth of history. If a fiction text gives an accurate, believable and likely portrayal of human experience and actions, the reader will have cause to believe, for the time of the text, that this is a version of truth. If the world of the text parallels the world as we believe we know it, adding only those elements needed to create character, the human aspect of narrative which is, at times, lost in the record, it can be as true as a purportedly non-fiction text which does exactly the same things.

There is a difficulty in establishing links between disparate events in history, as Michel Foucault has pointed out (*Archaeology*, 4). He focuses, in part, on the mutation of the importance of the document in history, changing from a source to a structure to be ordered and arranged. History, he says, “aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument” (Foucault, 8) that documents have become. However, he does not define the documents of history as either fact or fiction. Instead, his view of the truth of history is that it is a description of the transitions of power from group to group. This archaeological/genealogical view produces, rather than different histories, an imperative to explore the relative merits of texts, to reject the mundane and traditional interpretations in order to gain a wider view of history.

Early in his career, Foucault drew up an intellectual schema for establishing a position about history. Rabinow quotes Foucault as saying:

One must reject everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (this is considered a positive term by some and used by others, on the contrary, as a reproach), or else you criticize the Enlightenment and try to escape from its principles of rationality. (Rabinow, 313).

Foucault was speaking of the possibility of madness as a viable alternative to reason, but the statement could as easily apply to history. One can either accept the traditional documents of historical study, or gain a wider, perhaps more accurate, view of history through documents which may not be traditional, such as fiction texts.

Just as Foucault points out that archaeology is “more willing than the history of ideas to speak of discontinuities, ruptures, gaps, entirely new forms of positivity, and of sudden redistributions” (187), so fiction is much more willing than the traditional documents of history to perform analogous actions within the field of historical discourse. Thus, fiction can take risks with its formation of truth in a text which fact cannot, and thereby produce a form of truth which is impossible to fact alone. Fiction can take facts and juxtapose them in ways that differ from the record, while retaining their authenticity. It can place in the joints of the record such things as feelings and thoughts which do not form part of the record, but which are valid in terms of human experience, to produce a tactility of history.

Truth, however, is still not something which can be simply defined. It remains problematic. Foucault sees the production of truth more as a social function of a culture, rather than how it is defined. It is the political and economic institutions which have control over the truth as a concept which must be altered, but not by taking truth away from those systems of power which control it, but by “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within

which it operates at the present time” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 133). He sees truth as something which is both diachronically and synchronically unstable. Two different newspapers will have different versions of the same story, interpreting the facts differently according to their editorial policies. Different cultures will produce different readings of events and produce them as reports. The USA can be either ‘The Evil Empire’ or ‘The World’s Policeman,’ according to your cultural bias. Truth, as Foucault sees it above, is fragile, and varies with who speaks it.

In order to gain a different perspective on truth, it is necessary to disrupt its connections with its traditional field of operation. This can be done by changing some of the parameters within which truth operates, while leaving the facts alone. It is in this way that such texts as John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* can challenge the accepted readings of the development of art in Western civilisation. Berger did this by changing the ideological and philosophical parameters of viewing the works of art in the Western tradition, and by foregrounding aspects of women, economic power and the function of advertising that were obscured in a more traditional view. Berger did not discover new information about the subject, but simply altered the viewpoint of the viewer to reveal what had been there all along. It is this same thing which can occur in the historical novel, or in fiction of the contemporary world.

If a book gives an accurate portrait of a time and/or a place, does it matter whether it was intended to be fact or fiction? It can still be truth. It is common for texts that are faithful to their setting and their references to create fictions that are as meaningful and truthful as texts that are equally faithful yet are intended to be factual. The devices fiction writers use to achieve the impression of validity which will allow the reader to, as Cravens points out, approach the text seriously are many, and include the ‘false document’ technique.

4. THE FLASHMAN NOVELS

One of the most successful series of historical novels of the twentieth century that uses the 'false document' technique to establish its credentials as fictional truth is George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman series. The 'false document' which underlies the series of novels is the 'Flashman Papers,' a series of memoirs written in the declining years of the protagonist and discovered in a tea-chest in a Leicestershire sale room in 1965. The departure from the record, what Hellekson terms the "nexus event" (251), is the actual existence of the character Flashman, mentioned in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Fraser creates this nexus in the first book of the series: "A point of major literary interest about the papers is that they clearly identify Flashman, the school bully of Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, with the celebrated Victorian soldier of the same name" (Fraser, *Flashman*, explanatory foreword, un-numbered). Fraser supplies this Flashman with a background, first and middle names (Harry Paget), and an adventurous life wherein he comes into contact with many of the most famous figures of the nineteenth century. The most important aspect of the supposed documents is that in them Flashman states that he will tell the truth about himself and the times in which he lived. Flashman is an admitted bully, cheat, wastrel and coward, despite his high rank, and has nothing to lose by telling the truth. Other novels create fictional figures who are purely imaginary, or based on actual historical characters. Bernard Cornwell's Sharpe series is an example of the first category, based on the character of Richard Sharpe, a child of the gutter who rises to high rank in the British army of the Napoleonic Wars. While the novels are faithful to the times, Sharpe is a purely invented character. The adventures in which he takes part during his career are largely verifiable by reference to the historic record and to the existing remains, to which Cornwell refers in his afterwords. Cornwell also takes pains to distinguish what is invented from what is real in his forewords and afterwords. These make the checkerboard of fiction and non-fiction in the text clearer.

The Flashman series, however, is an example of the hybrid text to which Marie-Laure Ryan refers. The fictional and non-fictional elements are inextricably intermingled in a checkerboard, each contributing to the total effect, but each distinct. In 1964 Peter Watkins made his distinguished documentary, *Culloden*, in which he employed ciné vérité techniques to investigate an event which took place long before the camera had been invented. It was hailed as a new way of presenting historical films. It gave greater sense of the reality of the world of the eighteenth century by interviewing characters who would not have appeared in the history books. It filled in the gaps in the picture of the battle of Culloden by focusing on what was often ignored. The feelings of ordinary people swept up in great affairs is foregrounded by interviews, as is the confusion which surrounded the battle itself by interviews with those in charge. The Flashman series is the literary equivalent of

Culloden. It presents history which does more than accord with the records. It examines the contentious parts of the record and presents conjectural answers to them. This occurs often in the narratives to explain such things as why Custer's Last Stand took place (*Redskins*, 312 - 325), how plans were brought to Sir Colin Campbell outside Lucknow (*Flashman in the Great Game*, 240 - 250), or the facts behind the killing of Trooper Moyles in China (*Flashman and the Dragon*, 155). It is as if Flashman tells us the meta-narrative of history, a history that is as real as the record without being part of the record, a history that can be deduced, even if it is the unenunciated truth that lies behind the bald facts.

It is common for more than a single story to be told in the same novel, and this is particularly important where one of the stories is factual and the other fictional in a hybrid text. The Flashman series juxtaposes at least two stories in each book. There is the story of the historic event and the story of Flashman's adventure which links to these. That Flashman is involved in these historic events, and interprets them, is not a great difference from history texts. In a historical document, there is an implied narrator, and usually the story is told from a third-person viewpoint. The exception to this is when the document is in the form of letters or reports, when the narration is first-person. Fraser also enacts the role of editor and referee, in that his notes sometimes moderate Flashman's opinions and recollections. This formula, wherein an editor comments upon documents as a record of history and amplifies them, is common. A recent example is *Saltwater in the Ink*, edited by Lucy Sussex. This text is a collection of sea-diaries, letters and clippings which illustrate the writers' impressions of immigration to Australia. In format and intent, it is very similar to the Flashman novels, with one distinction which becomes increasingly academic; the writers of Sussex' memoirs were real people whose existence could be proven, while Flashman is not.

Flashman occupies a different point in the spectrum of fiction to fact from that of a purely invented character. *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was based on the real experiences of Thomas Hughes, the writer. These were largely those of his older brother, George. Many of the other characters were real figures of the time, such as Dr Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby who expelled Flashman. It is arguable that Flashman, the character in Hughes' novel, may well have been based on a real person, as the character of Tom Brown was based on Hughes' brother. If so, Fraser's fictional character of Flashman is based on another fictional character who was, in turn, based on a real character. This recursive characterisation becomes even more abstract in *Flashman in the Great Game*. In this novel Flashman reads *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. He, a fictional character, reads a real book about himself, a fictional character who may have been based on a real character (*Great Game*, 321 - 324). This is a doubly recursive characterisation. Flashman has already, in *Flashman's Lady*, encountered the fictional Tom Brown, prior to the writing of the novel about his schooldays. The conflation of fact and fiction,

the mixing of the two elements, is one which produces a different concept of the truth. As William Reynolds states, “The truths of fiction . . . are big truths, universal truths, usually written by sensitive artists who set the human condition in a believable context” (15). It allows the reader to see *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* as representing the truth of Hughes’ experiences differently, by demonstrating the limits of fictionality and factuality in the text. No fictional character is ever created utterly from imagination, because the inventions of a writer are, as Eagleton has argued (48 - 54), drawn from their cultural surrounds and, in many cases, from their observations of characters in real life. The character of Flashman is composed of both truth and fiction. The fiction of Hughes contains truth, and it is this to which Flashman, in the fiction of Fraser, reacts. It is not only recursive characterisation in operation; it is an interrogation of the very way in which fiction is formed.

An extended conceit of the series is to blend fiction and reality together. In *Royal Flash* (1843 and 1847 - 1848), Flashman impersonates a poxed nobleman and becomes embroiled with the Schleswig-Holstein question. Herein he meets both Otto Von Bismark and Lola Montez. It is here that he surmises that these fictional adventures of Flashman may have informed Anthony Hope’s *Prisoner of Zenda*. The origin of the truth becomes even more recursive: Hope writing a novel based on the adventures of a fictional character who is referred to in Hope’s own fiction, but who is based on a fictional character based on a factual character.

The Flashman series provides insight into events both significant and obscure in the nineteenth century. Flashman’s role in them, including his encounters with famous names of the period, provides a uniquely constructed point of view. In a series of twelve novels, beginning with *Flashman* in 1969, George MacDonald Fraser has created a character of such impressive believability that some academics treated the first novel as a factual memoir, and reviewed it as such. The extent of this academic error was outlined in Alden Whitman’s article “Gen Sir Harry Flashman and Aide Con the Experts” (45). The Flashman series became popular, partially, I believe, because it represents an idiosyncratic view of nineteenth century history, reconstructing the truth of those events through the fictional adventures of the protagonist.

The conceit for the series is that Fraser is actually the editor of a cache of papers written by Flashman and discovered in 1965 (Fraser, *Flashman*, explanatory notes). Each of the novels purports to be a separate “packet” of papers opened and edited by Fraser. His statement is that his editing largely consists of the additional notes and appendices that accompany each novel. This is part of the ostensible veracity of the novels. The annotations amplify the statements of Flashman and explain the situations in which he finds himself. They also seek to “correct” the apparent mistakes he makes in his papers. An example of this is found in *Flashman and the Dragon*, where Fraser notes “Flashman is right in supposing that the regimental march of the Buffs is attributed to Handel, but almost certainly

wrong in saying that it was played on the march to Pekin: the Buffs had been left behind" (316). By means of these corrections portraying Flashman as a fallible narrator, Fraser adds to the appearance of verisimilitude of the documents. They look more like genuine reminiscences, written after a period of time, and less like contemporary essays.

The series is written in the first-person, in the voice of the nonagenarian Flashman as he reminisces about his past, from being expelled from Rugby School in 1839 to rescuing his errant daughter in 1894. Throughout the series, Flashman is involved in many of the famous events of the nineteenth century. The greater proportion of these events is concerned with wars, military expeditions and the military in general. They range from the First Anglo-Afghan war (1839 - 1842) to the Zulu War and The Battle of Rorke's Drift (1879). When his adventures do not directly involve the military or military figures, they are related to political or social events, as in *Royal Flash*, set in 1848, which involves the Schleswig-Holstein Question, through to the pastiche of Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle's *The Adventure of the Empty House*, set in 1894. Throughout the series, Flashman invites us to trust him, with his admission that he is a rogue and a scoundrel at the end of his life and the knowledge that his papers will not be seen until after his death which lends an authenticity enhanced by the addenda of Fraser.

As previously noted, the creation of any text does not stand independent of the culture, the society in which it was created, and Fraser is clearly looking back at the nineteenth century from the perspective of the twentieth. Even though there is not a one-to-one correspondence between literature and the times in which it was created, there is a relationship, as Eagleton has suggested in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (51); literature is not merely reflective, but adds in the results of participation in the writer's culture and society. It is a product of interaction with the real world that lies outside the text, and reproduces elements of that world within the text. It supports Ryan's contention that elements of the Actual World can coexist within the Textual Actual World. Fraser's engagement with post-colonialism, most clearly seen in *Flashman and the Great Game*, set in the time of the Indian Mutiny, is an example of this dualism.

Flashman is not only a participant in great events of the nineteenth century; he is a commentator upon them, and conscious of his commentary. He is aware, since he is writing of his own past, of what others have written about the events in which he has been involved, and the people he has met. Unlike writers such as Joseph Conrad, with his biting commentary on the effects of colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*, Fraser has the benefit of hindsight to guide him in his creation of Flashman's commentary. He can moderate and comment upon Flashman's opinions, thereby creating a more complex character and adding complexity to the narrative.

Revolutions, social change and the end of an era combine to form a major theme in the novels. It is explored throughout the series, from the actual revolt against British Imperialism in *Flashman*, *Flashman in the Great Game* and *Flashman and the Mountain of Light*, to revolt or potential for revolt within a decadent culture in other novels. The only novel where this has a very minor role is *Flashman's Lady*, wherein the ruler of Madagascar, Queen Ranavalona, has such a grasp on power and her island kingdom is so remote from the rest of the world that the potential for revolution is small. It would seem from this that one of the truths that is framed in the fiction is that the nineteenth century was an anomaly, and that it was, worldwide, a culture that could not last for much longer. Flashman, because he has had such wide experience of it, both regrets its passing and sees it as inevitable. He transmits to the reader the glorious foolishness that composed much of the history of the nineteenth century. He emphasises the rise of the common person, and the fall of the privileged classes, particularly in the army.

The first novel in the series, *Flashman*, narrates the story of Flashman's involvement in the first Anglo-Afghan war, from which he emerged with distinction through a process which involved extreme cowardice and pure luck. It set the style for the entire series of twelve books. All the books are marked by an introduction from the 'false documents' and by a series of endnotes and footnotes. These explain incidents within the text and serve as references, lending an air of academic credibility by displaying the depth of research. Since one of Flashman's major talents is for languages, many of the footnotes are translations of words or expressions which occur in the text. These include Sioux, Pushtu, Urdu, Arabic, Russian, Chinese and most European languages.

The unflinchingly candid nature of the character portrayals adds verisimilitude to the books, along with the accuracy of the settings and the history of the events. *Flashman* introduces these character sketches, which are continued throughout the rest of the novels. In many instances, they challenge the accepted portraits of these people or, in some cases, reinforce them:

Not the least interesting feature of Flashman's recollections, to students of history, is the light they cast on the early years of many famous Victorians, who are seen through the unsparing eyes of one who, while a self-confessed coward, libertine, and scoundrel, was nevertheless a scrupulous reporter. (Fraser; *Flashman and the Dragon*, explanatory notes)

Many of these reports are unflattering, such as the sketch of Lord Cardigan: "He was God's own original fool, there's no doubt of that . . . And he was arrogant as no other man I've ever met, and as sure of his own unshakeable rightness as any man could be – even when his wrong-headedness was there for all to see" (Fraser, *Flashman*, 28). Others cast quite a revealing light on the personage, such as Flashman's brief portrait of Queen Victoria in her youth: "She was just a child then, rather plump, and pretty enough beneath the neck. Her eyes were large and popped a little, and her teeth stuck out too

much” (*Flashman*, 244). All the comments on the characters are supported by Fraser’s endnotes and appendices, and he takes pains to detail their role in the historic event. Flashman’s role is to provide an insight into how some event happened, such as the Charge of the Light Brigade. Immediately prior to the charge, Flashman incites Lord Raglan to action by stating “There goes our record – Wellington never lost a gun, you know” (*Flashman at the Charge*, 95).

Flashman uses his foreword to the first set of papers to set the candid tone of the memoirs: “But I am concerned with facts, and since many of them are uncreditable to me, you can rest assured they are true” (*Flashman*, 11). His observations, like his character sketches, are supported by copious endnotes and footnotes. There are thirty of these in the first novel of the series, *Flashman*, and the greatest number is in *Flashman and the Redskins*; eighty-one. In addition to these notes, there are appendices in all novels from the second in the series, *Royal Flash*. Some of these explanatory appendices are thousands of words long, adding a great deal of depth to the narrative, and also functioning to give a greater air of factuality to them. For instance, in *Flashman and the Redskins*, the appendix on The Battle of the Little Bighorn (Appendix B, 478 - 482) is approximately 1,600 words, and makes the point that the battle itself was no more than a skirmish (478). It gives a detailed account of the events of the battle, but its major point is to create a sense of place; Fraser travelled to the Little Bighorn to see it for himself, and says; “For those who want to know something of the Little Bighorn that cannot be got from books, let them travel up the Yellowstone valley . . . and walk across the Greasy Grass” (481 - 482).

Fraser also uses these notes to question the accuracy of Flashman’s memory and these corrections serve both a narrative and an evidentiary purpose. Where Flashman describes a character in *Flashman and the Mountain of Light*, Fraser, in the notes, disagrees:

There is a mystery here: the “tough, shrewd-looking heavyweight” who called on Flashman with Bhai Ram Singh hardly sounds like the “good, kind and polite old Fakir Azizudeen” who had been Runjeet Singh’s foreign minister, and was still to the fore at this time, although he died of natural causes a few weeks later. Both the physical description and the style are inconsistent; indeed, the only way in which Bhai Ram’s companion resembles Azizudeen is in his uncompromising honesty. Either Flashman’s visitor was another courtier altogether, and he has simply got the name wrong, or his descriptive memory is playing him false for once. (Fraser, *Mountain of Light*, 353)

Fraser corrects Flashman on dates, since Flashman himself admits “I’m not good on dates as a rule” (*Flashman on the March*, 221), to which Fraser replies, in the notes, “For once, Flashman gives an exact date” (*March*, 310). They establish that Flashman is a fallible narrator, and make the text much more

exact in terms of its portrayal of history. It is similar to Joanna Courteau's observation on the "Subversivity of the personal narrative in its challenge to the official historical discourse because it offers a glimpse of history not only excluded, but often actively suppressed" (49). This detailed verisimilitude fooled the experts. Of the 34 reviews published in the United States in 1969, after the publication of *Flashman*, ten took the text to be an actual memoir – "genuine autobiography" (Whitman, 66) – of an obscure Victorian.

The *Flashman* series provides memorable sketches of characters and a portrait of the times in which the novels are set. It is Fraser's vision, his 'truth,' of the history of the nineteenth century. Victorian Britain is portrayed in all its primness and fussy attention to detail, and in the whoring and drunkenness which lay just below its surface, through *Flashman's* eyes. In every novel which is concerned with the British imperial wars, Fraser points out that decisions were taken based on prejudice, poor intelligence and arrogance, rather than any sound military principles. A clear example of this is given in *Flashman in the Great Game*, when native troops refused cartridges which they believed to have been greased with pig and cow fat:

If he'd had his wits about him he'd have seen that the thing to do now was drop the cartridge for the moment, and badger Calcutta for a new one that the sepoy could grease themselves . . . He'd been defied by his own men, and by God, he wasn't having that. So the whole eighty-five were court-martialled, and the court . . . gave them all ten years' hard labour. (Fraser, 138 - 139)

It is *Flashman's* observations of social phenomena that give insight into the human part of the record, and they are written as the impressions of a person of full nature and perception. Three novels in particular stand out, and they are linked to the same extended theme; *Flash for Freedom*, *Flashman and the Angel of the Lord* and *Flashman and the Redskins*, the second novel being divided into two parts. The four parts of the story concern *Flashman's* first travels to America as an unwilling part of the crew of a slaver, his escape from both the slavers and the American authorities aided by the madam of a brothel at which he stayed, his travels in the early west with wagon trains, white bounty hunters and Indians, concluding, in the fourth part of the story, in the unintended consequences of these first two parts, when he returns to America in his fifties, accompanied this time by his wife, Elspeth. In the intervening novel, which sits between the two parts of *Flashman and the Redskins*, *Flashman* inadvertently returns to America, where he is drawn once more into the plans of the Underground Railroad, and, by a tortuous sequence of events, winds up at Harper's Ferry with John Brown.

Flashman has experienced the problems and triumphs of America and the settling of the west, from the first invasion to the final gasp of protest. He has witnessed the brutality of the slave trade and the corruption that made it possible, both as a slave keeper and a slave. He has participated in events momentous and scurrilous, triumphant and tragic, and it his *participation* that creates a different sort

of truth for the reader. It is cloaking the truth of bare facts in human experience, even fictional human experience that makes it possible for the reader to understand the human truth. This is the essence of the Flashman series; to make truth human. As Terry Pratchett says in *I Shall Wear Midnight*, “If it is not the truth, then it is what the truth ought to be” (348).

5. THE BLOODIEST ROSE

The novel which forms the major part of this thesis, *The Bloodiest Rose*, is, like the Flashman series, fiction which tries to make a human truth from fact. The historical facts are those surrounding Shakespeare, his life, his plays and, in particular, why he did not write a continuation of the Henriad; *Henry VII*. The contemporary facts are those of the world of theatre, from an insider's point of view, and the facts of the city of Sydney, where I lived for many years, and where I began a life in the theatre which has lasted, off and on, for some fifty years. These are the truths as I see them.

The task of the fiction writer is to make, from the whole cloth of fact, a fiction. Many of the incidents in *The Bloodiest Rose* actually happened, but have been changed to fit the text. The disaster at the Opera House to which Madelyn refers happened to a production of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* in 1976. Barry's description of his lover's death parallels that of another gay person in Sydney in 1973, in Clovelly. The description of his house is that of a house in Darlinghurst once owned by the artist Murray Weaver. These events and places are truths, whether they exist in a novel or a contemporary history.

The question becomes this: if a text is faithful to its sources, is it any less a truth if it transforms elements of these sources for the sake of telling a story than if it does not, for the sake of the record? Hayden White has said that historians tell stories by changing the elements of history for the sake of narrative. He distinguishes between stories, which are closed, and chronicles, which are open-ended, and argues that invention plays a part in the historian's task, which involves narrative techniques such as emplotment (6 - 11). In addition, records are subjective and sometimes inaccurate. Bias will also affect the way in which facts are presented, ignored or, in some cases, manufactured. In light of these things, *The Bloodiest Rose* aims to be just as truthful as a historic eye-witness narrative of a significant event. As Fraser makes clear in his notes to the Flashman series, even an eye-witness can be fallible in recording their story.

Even though the mainstream view of the authorship of the Shakespearean texts is that they are attributable to the glover's son from Stratford, there are nearly seventy names that have been proposed as alternatives to the Stratfordian view, ranging from William Alexander, a contemporary of Shakespeare's and a writer of "closet dramas"⁴ to Henry Wriothesley, Shakespeare's patron. The list also includes groups such as the Jesuits and the Rosicrucians, several women, and more than a

⁴ These are plays that are not intended to be performed, but to be read out loud by a solitary reader or small group.

few who were dead, such as Edmund Campion, or who died before the majority of the plays were written, such as Christopher Marlowe. Most of these competing claims to authorship can be seen in Elliott and Valenza's article "Oxford by the Numbers." Other contenders may be seen in John Gross' article "Denying Shakespeare" (38 - 44). By far the majority of these may be dismissed as fanciful. It is unlikely that Robert Devereaux could have found the time in his brief life to write the plays and poems prior to his death in 1576, thirteen years before the first play was produced. Marlowe and Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, have gained some support as candidates for Shakespeare's oeuvre. Marlowe's supporters claim that he was not in fact killed in Deptford on the 30th of May, 1593, but was instead banished. From exile, he sent his plays to Shakespeare, a businessman with whom he was friendly, and had them produced under his name. This is argued in Archie Webster's article "Was Marlowe the Man?" (81 - 86). Given Marlowe's shady past, the argument is that he had offended the crown in some way, but he was shown mercy instead of being executed or assassinated. The bulk of this argument relies on textual analysis of selected plays which, it is claimed, show direct evidence of Marlowe being the author. Pinksen has argued, in *Marlowe's Ghost*, that "The evidence for Marlowe's authorship of the works of Shakespeare is overwhelming" (xix). But Marlowe was a known playwright and there was no reason to adopt another name for those early Shakespeare plays. The case for de Vere was made by John Thomas Looney in 1920 in *Shakespeare Identified in Edward De Vere*. He argued that it was known that de Vere was a poet and playwright, but none of his plays was published under his own name (270 - 283). This was common for the aristocracy in the Elizabethan period. de Vere may have had his works published pseudonymously, and chosen Shakespeare as his nom de plume. The problem with this theory is that, like all competing authorship theories, it is based on conjecture. The support for the mainstream view is historically sufficient and, more importantly, it is *evidence*; it can be seen. Competing theories, without exception, rest on the concept that something is concealed. If we are to gauge the truthfulness of something by its probability, by far the greatest probability is that the person who wrote the plays was Shakespeare of Stratford. This is the stand taken by Dr Adam Bryant in the novel.

The number of plays Shakespeare wrote is problematic in itself. Heminge and Condell's First Folio of 1623 contained thirty-six plays, eighteen of which had been printed before in quarto or octavo form. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* had been published in 1609 in quarto, but was not included in the First Folio, although it was added to the Third Folio of 1663. These sources form the generally accepted canon of Shakespeare's plays. Tucker-Brooke lists forty-eight plays that might be or have been attributed to Shakespeare (xxx). *Two Noble Kinsmen* was almost certainly in collaboration with John Fletcher. Others are almost certainly works by other hands, although *Double Falsehood* has recently been published by the Arden Shakespeare as an authentic work.

The probability that Shakespeare collaborated with other writers is very high, which blurs the authorship question further. It is also probable that there were plays which were written by Shakespeare for other companies, or written for his own company, that have been lost. *Cardenio* and *Loves Labours Won* are two plays of which there are records, but of the texts there is no extant copy. There is no work, either play or poem, in Shakespeare's own hand which has survived. It is claimed that approximately 150 lines of Munday and Chettle's *Sir Thomas More* and *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, attributed to Thomas Middleton, are in Shakespeare's hand, but the evidence is claimed to be far from conclusive by Giles E. Dawson in his article "Shakespeare's Handwriting" (119 - 128).

The Bloodiest Rose takes as its point of departure from the historical record that Shakespeare also wrote a play that was performed once, as a closet drama, and then became lost. The play was *Henry VII*. In *Richard III* the Earl of Richmond kills Richard and becomes Henry VII, ending the Wars of the Roses. Henry's rule was eventful. There were revolts and rebellions in 1486, 1487, 1491, 1495 and 1497. Arthur, Henry's heir, died suddenly in 1502, six months after he had wed Catherine of Aragon. Henry had Pope Julius II make a dispensation so that she could marry his second son who would become Henry VIII. Henry VII was still a relatively young man when he died in 1509, aged 52. A dramatic life such as this was grist for the Shakespearean mill. It involves the question of what actually happened to the Princes in the Tower, how Henry's younger son came to be his heir by way of annulment, papal negotiations, politics, rebellion or, as Shakespeare put it "Baseness? Bastardy? Base? Base?" (*King Lear*, I, ii, 10). Moreover, it would provide a fitting conclusion to the Henriad, the plays about the Wars of the Roses. While there is no record of Shakespeare ever writing *Henry VII*, it would seem that the question is more why he did not than whether he did. In the novel, he did.

The history of the plays forms a background to the novel, which revolves around the first modern production of *Henry VII*. The story of the play is set in 1502, when Arthur died, and the plot has several elements drawn from the history of Henry. The first of these is the fate of the Princes in the Tower. In another historical conundrum, Edward V of England and Richard of Shrewsbury Duke of York were allegedly murdered in the Tower of London some time in 1483. In the discovered play, it is made clear that they were not killed, but rather taken by Buckingham as a bargaining chip. The two bodies later discovered were those of two other boys, left by Buckingham to be killed by Tyrrel, Richard's agent. Thomas More, who wrote of the murder in his history of King Richard, states that Tyrrel waited at the bottom of the stairs and sent two other men, Forest and Dighton, in to smother the Princes (Sylvester, 65). This is the story that Shakespeare adapted from More for his *Richard III*, but he had another story to follow for *Henry VII*.

In *The Bloodiest Rose* Shakespeare came into possession of knowledge that changed his ideas about Richard, Henry and the succession. This knowledge came to him through Christopher Marlowe.

Marlowe has been put forward by A.L. Rowse as the “other poet” mentioned in the Sonnets (750). His death is referred to by Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. They moved in the same social group. *The Bloodiest Rose* treats their friendship as fact, rather than conjecture, and that the play *Henry VII* grew from that relationship.

It has been speculated that Marlowe had been a spy for Sir Francis Walsingham, as is discussed in Park Honan’s *Christopher Marlowe, Poet and Spy*. He had been educated at Cambridge, where he was only awarded his Master’s degree in 1587 after the Privy Council intervened on his behalf, commending him for good service to the Queen. In the novel, Marlowe’s confidential service was to remove possible descendants of the Princes in the Tower. It was this knowledge that protected Marlowe from the consequences of being a homosexual at a time when this was punishable by death, a suspected atheist, a magician, and, in general, a rakehell. J.B. Steane has said, “It seems absurd to dismiss all of these Elizabethan rumours and accusations as ‘the Marlowe myth’” (Steane, iv). If Steane is correct, and I believe he is, then it seems reasonable to base a fiction on the facts of Marlowe’s life.

Marlowe, at Cambridge, would have been attracted to the beautiful, wealthy and intelligent young Wriothesley. Wriothesley was nine years younger than Marlowe, but they were both at Cambridge between 1585 and 1587. Wriothesley was “not sexually settled” (Rowse, 750) when he was Shakespeare’s patron in 1592. Rowse, among others, suggests that Marlowe and Wriothesley formed a relationship when they met again in London (750). Burghley, Wriothesley’s guardian since Walsingham’s death, would be less than pleased by the illicit relationship. In May, 1593, Marlowe was killed in a brawl with Ingram Frizer, who was pardoned on the grounds of self-defence. Frizer had been employed in secret missions before.

The Bloodiest Rose blends fact and fiction to put forward that Shakespeare used Marlowe’s secret to write the play *Henry VII*. He used this play to help Cecil secure Wriothesley’s pardon when he was implicated in the Essex Rebellion and sentenced to death in 1601. It had only been performed once, in secret, prior to the Rebellion. The fiction, however, fits in with the facts. There are gaps within the record, and that which is recorded does not deny the possibilities explored in *The Bloodiest Rose*. The likelihood of Marlowe telling the secret to Shakespeare is high. The chain of events that follows on from this is logical, and that is one test for truthfulness.

The Bloodiest Rose uses a form of ‘lost document’ technique to add historical cachet. In this case the document in question is the entire corpus of Shakespeare’s plays and poems, in his own hand. Every lost document has to be rediscovered, and the discovery may either be deliberate or accidental. The fictional back-story of the Flashman Papers is that they were discovered “during a sale of household

furniture at Ashby” (Fraser, *Flashman*, explanatory notes). The Shakespeare corpus in *The Bloodiest Rose* was discovered by Geoffrey Mayne in an antique chest he bought at an auction in Cuba.

One problem that is addressed by the novel is that of the preservation of the text. The chest bought by Mayne was filled with sealing-wax that had melted and formed a solid cake, protecting the smaller case with the Shakespeare works inside it. Papers in a sealed case with little air inside will soon, in the process of oxidation, use up the oxygen inside, leaving nitrogen, a relatively inert gas. A cool temperature, such as would be found at the sea bed, would further act to preserve the documents. Paper in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was made from rags, and had a very low acid content. It is reasonable to assume that a box of papers, sealed against the elements and written on rag paper, would have every chance of surviving for five hundred years. There are libraries all over the world, as in the Escorial, outside Madrid, where books may be seen that have survived for much longer than this. Thus, it is something which is within the bounds of possibility, and fits conveniently within the narrative.

How did the manuscript come to be in that place and time? None of Shakespeare’s fair copies, or even first copies, has ever been discovered. There is no play in his handwriting extant, although Sir Edward Maunde Thompson suggested in a monograph published in 1917 that three pages of *Sir Thomas More* were in Shakespeare’s hand (28 - 44). As a playwright working for a company of players, Shakespeare had to make a fair copy for others to copy out the individual roles for the players to enact. These would not have been printed, but handwritten. Wriothesley was not only Shakespeare’s patron, but his friend, and Shakespeare dedicated two early poems (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*) and the Sonnets to him. It would seem reasonable for Shakespeare to give fair copies of not only the Sonnets but the plays to Wriothesley, either on his retirement from the stage in 1613, or on his death in 1616. There is no specific mention of the manuscripts in Shakespeare’s will.

There is the question of how the manuscript might have got to Cuban waters. Wriothesley and his eldest son died within days of each other in 1624, of a fever, in Holland. They had volunteered to fight in Holland’s war against Spain. *The Bloodiest Rose* assumes they carried the case with the Shakespeare manuscript with them. The manuscripts would have been sent back to Thomas, Wriothesley’s young second son, in Virginia. They were disguised as general cargo, hidden inside a chest of sealing wax. The ship carrying them crossed paths with a Spanish ship on its way to the Caribbean which attacked her. The Dutch ship was taken, but badly damaged and on fire. The fire melted the wax in the chest, but the cargo was removed before the manuscript was harmed. The Spanish ship was overtaken by a storm and sank in the vicinity of the Caribbean. Over the course of centuries, the ship broke up and the chest was eventually washed up on a beach in Cuba, where it was found by a

fisherman. The fisherman used it as a table for many years, until, on his death, his sons auctioned it off to Geoffrey Mayne.

The manuscript would, obviously, be worth a vast amount of money if auctioned. It would also be invaluable to academic research. The 1623 First Folio of Heminge and Condell is considered reliable for only twenty of the plays. Standard editions of today, such as the Arden Shakespeare, are drawn from the best available sources, and there is often disagreement between standard editions. There is the additional problem that the plays are not copyright, and cannot be copyrighted. Mayne decides to produce the only play that has never seen production; *Henry VII*.

The characters in the novel are largely drawn from observation and personal experience of more than fifty years involved with theatre, even if they are sometimes drawn a little larger than life. In some ways they are creations that represent theatrical archetypes and represent a symbolic truth: Madelyn, the hard-arsed director; Barry, the effete assistant producer; the actors, ranging from Henry, the flamboyant old stager trying to make one last stand, to Kevin, the screen actor attempting to gain credibility on the stage and Leon, the womaniser who is tired of the role he plays in life. There are the actresses; Claire, the prima donna and Nikki, her earthy counterpoint. At the centre of them all is Ed Cahill and his partner and wardrobe mistress Linda. Ed is the one who must pull it all together, deal with the tantrums and tears, all the while covering his own stress. Such characters types do exist in the theatre. If the names are false, the types are truthful. The characters reflect the balance of 'real' characters that are actually found in the theatre, again reflecting the real world in fiction, as the real characters in the Flashman series link back to history. As in Ryan's concept of the checkerboard of fact and fiction, the characters are analogs of actually existing characters. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan says of characters:

The so-called 'realistic' argument sees characters as imitations of people and tends to treat them – with greater or lesser sophistication – as if they were our neighbours or friends, while also abstracting them from the verbal texture of the work under consideration. (Rimmon-Kenan, 32)

Thus it is in *The Bloodiest Rose*. The characters represent the qualities found in real people, and occupy positions in accord with these qualities. Ed is the viewpoint character because the stage manager is involved in all facets of the production from the very beginning. The same positioning is true of other characters. Madelyn's motivation to be a director is explained in the two passages where first Henry and later Madelyn herself relate her history to Ed. We get Henry's offhand disclosure of his background and the way he became an actor, Leon's questioning of his self-positioning as a lothario and Marco's unveiling of his eventful childhood. They stand against a background of Ryan's Actual World, even if they are part of the Textual Actual World.

It was a distinct choice to set the novel in contemporary Sydney, and specifically the Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown. It became obvious during the course of the writing that this is not a historical novel in the sense that the Flashman novels are, but a novel about the impact of the discovery of Shakespeare's works. From the discussions that take place within *The Bloodiest Rose*, we learn about Elizabethan times, Shakespeare, Marlowe and the rest. These are discussions of facts, of the real world and of the historic, verifiable record. The Sydney in which it takes place is real. The rest is made up, based on these facts.

While the Elizabethan Theatre did exist, much as described in *The Bloodiest Rose*, it has now become the Enmore Theatre Centre, and somewhat changed. I set the narrative of the production in the Elizabethan Theatre because I was intimately familiar with it. The theatre was a grande dame, dark for much of the time, but glittering with life at other times. The reference to a poster of Glenda Jackson in *Hedda Gabler* is exact; she played the part in a touring production at the Elizabethan in the late sixties. The potted history of the theatre given by Barry is reasonably accurate, save for the fact that the Elizabethan was built later and transformed in the late eighties. The facts are once more embodied in the fiction. The hand-paged flies, the expansive bio box, the extensive fin de siecle decorations and large proportions are all factors that make the story an engagement with the Actual World.

Other places in Sydney are modelled on those which still exist. Central Station is still as it has been for many years. Manly is still "Seven miles from Sydney, and a thousand miles from care," as it says on the monument just outside Manly Pier. Sydney University still looms in pseudo-Gothic splendour in Parramatta Road. While the names have usually been changed, the restaurants and coffee-lounges exist, and the directions for getting to and from places are exact. As Pavel says of Dickens' London, the demarcation between the real Sydney of the observed world and the Sydney of the novel is difficult to establish with any sharp boundaries.

The Bloodiest Rose is an example of the hybrid text described by Marie-Laure Ryan. Within the fictional elements are bound hard, solid facts that may be verified by reference to external records or, in the case of the setting, walking the streets of the city of Sydney. While there is much that is invented within the text, there is much that is not, and what is invented draws on a bedrock of factuality. You can walk the streets of Sydney and find the landmarks that are in the novel. All the references to Shakespeareana, apart from those to *Henry VII*, are factual. The comments on Elizabethan history are accurate. There is no evidence that *Henry VII* was ever written, there is no evidence that Shakespeare's fair copies were given to Wriothesley, nor that the events which led to their discovery ever took place. These things are invented. However, they are possible within the range of history. There is nothing in these inventions that offends the historic record, thus they pass the test of coherence for their

truthfulness. Much of what is used in the novel can be verified by reference to this same historic record or other evidence, such as Wriostheley's death in 1822, or the geography of Sydney. This passes the correspondence test for truth, as other aspects of the novel pass all those referred to earlier, but the tests of pragmatism and universal consent.

If the hybrid text which is *The Bloodiest Rose* is seen by a reader as being truthful in its fact and in its fiction, then it passes those tests as well, and creates a possible world which is believable and which, more importantly, tells a *human* truth. It creates what Ernest Hemingway referred to in an interview with George Plimpton:

From things that have happened and from things as they exist and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality. That is why you write and for no other reason that you know of. But what about all the reasons that no one knows? (Hemingway quoted in Plimpton, 86)

A writer constructs a text from their own experience, their own knowledge and observations. They make things up that fit in with these real things, and it is something that has not existed before, drawn from what did exist before, and that may be the greatest truth of all.

6. CONCLUSION

Fiction is an invention. The writers of fiction use those things which surround them and the tools of narrative to construct something which has never been seen before. Some of its elements may have been seen, as the facts of historical fiction are evidence drawn from the record, as a setting may mirror the reality of a place, but the whole work is new. The purpose of this new work, this invention, is to put forward a new truth. The new truth it puts forward is based on the story-teller's oldest question; "What would happen if . . ." The writer can answer this question and tell the reader a little of the truth of the world in which that reader lives. They can use characters to demonstrate the truth of being human, because characters are a mirror for observers, in which they can see themselves.

Because of the latitude which fiction gives to the writer, the invention can be a model of the future, based on the present, or a model of the past, based on both the past and the present. *The Bloodiest Rose* is an invention based on the past and the present. Something from the past is discovered which leads to events in the present day. The discovery is something which does not, to our knowledge, exist, but there is no reason to assume that it cannot exist. The logic upon which the discovery rests is valid. That it simply has not happened yet does not disprove it. What happens after its discovery is also valid. *The Bloodiest Rose* is an invention which works, for a given value of logical truthfulness.

The final piece of the transaction between reader and writer is the judgement of the reader. Does this work tell the truth; or at least enough truth to be considered truthful? Is it a valid statement about the human universe? Much of this assessment will depend upon the skill of the writer in blending the fact and the fancy in their fiction, and making the fancy as valid as the fact. The concept expressed in the exegesis which accompanies the novel examines the relationship of truth and fiction, and shows that they are not exclusive, but related, and that fiction is a way of making facts more real. Whether *The Bloodiest Rose* and the exegesis are truthful, valid and convincing is now the purview of the reader.

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