

**School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts**

**The Dissenter and Anti-authoritarian Aspects of Australian History  
and Character that Inform the Moral Ambiguity that Marks  
Australian Crime Fiction**

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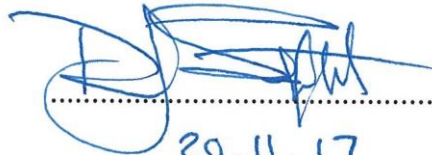
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## DECLARATION

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis consists of two distinct but related parts: a creative component, the novel ‘The Grass Mud Horse’, and an exegesis. Both will attempt to answer the question: How has the moral ambiguity that marks both colonial and contemporary Australian crime fiction been informed and influenced by the dissenter and anti-authoritarian aspects of Australian history and character?

Crime fiction has a long tradition in Australian culture, ensured by its Western origins as a penal colony. Australia’s convict heritage, and the wave of working-class migrants during the Gold Rush, both led to a purported national character suspicious of authority, and lent its crime fiction a distinct voice, such that the forces of law and order were commonly seen as agents of repression, in a nation without a Bill of Rights or any constitutional protection of civil liberties.

This resulted in early colonial Australian crime fiction differing significantly from other crime fiction in the Anglosphere, in that much like the seasons in the southern hemisphere, the moral sensibilities of Australian crime fiction were inverted.

The novel ‘The Grass Mud Horse’ is a crime thriller set in present-day Perth. It is the third part of a trilogy, the first two novels of which have already been published: ‘Heist’ was published by Allen & Unwin in July 2013, and was followed by ‘Marble Bar’, published in July 2014. Each novel is contemporary crime fiction set in Western Australia, and features the same protagonists: Gareth Ford, an engineer framed as the inside man on a bullion robbery at the gold mine where he works, and Rose Kavanagh, a detective with the Gold Stealing Detection Unit, who helps Ford when she finds herself shut out of the investigation by corrupt police officers. The first two novels were partially set in outback Western Australia, a more lawless domain, and also echo the themes discussed in the exegesis.

'The Grass Mud Horse' is a sequel to those books, but is an independent story able to stand alone without the reader having necessarily read the first two books.

The novel is loosely based on recent events, notably the relationship between the Packer family and the Ho family of Macau, and their long struggle to procure a second casino licence in Sydney. The Ho family have been split by internal squabbles as the former wives of aging patriarch Stanley Ho try to install their children in key positions within the family companies.

The novel aims to capture Perth society as China becomes Australia's biggest trading partner, and address media anxieties of Chinese investment in property and minerals resources, and the resulting irony whereby the mining companies dig up Australia and sell it to the Chinese, and then the casinos try to win it back from visiting 'high rollers'.

The novel uses the conventions of *noir* fiction, characterised by cynicism, fatalism and moral ambiguity, to portray instances of corruption within Australia's liberal democracy and compare it to corruption within the People's Republic of China.

The exegesis does not directly address the content of the novel, but discusses the development of the cynicism, fatalism and moral ambiguity prominent in 'The Grass Mud Horse'. Although contemporary Australian crime fiction is heavily influenced by British and American crime fiction of the twentieth century, this thesis explores how many of the roots of contemporary Australian crime fiction run much deeper, and connect to ideas of Australian national identity and character forged in the colonial era.

It examines how the moral ambiguity usually associated with *noir* fiction of the twentieth century was present much earlier in Australian crime fiction. If the 'psychological reason for the weakening of the detective story in recent years is a weakening of the sense of sin' (Symons, 1993), then the result is that British and

American crime fiction has moved closer to the moral ambiguity already well-established in the Australian canon.

## **THE GRASS MUD HORSE: A NOVEL**

### **1.**

‘It’s like a stage set,’ said Kavanagh, looking across the broad sweep of water at the city lights on the far side of the river. ‘It doesn’t seem to have any depth from here. Like it’s cut out of a plywood sheet.’

The water was flat and calm, no wind to ripple its surface, and the city skyline was reflected in it, a perfect mirror image.

Hackett handed her a cardboard cup of gas-station coffee and sat down next to her on the hood of the car. She felt the suspension of the police cruiser dip under his weight.

‘I always feel that if a big wind came up off the ocean, the city might blow over,’ she said. ‘Just fall flat. Slap onto the water and float away downriver.’

She held the scalding coffee by the rim of the cup and let the steam lift the smell of it to her nose. She knew he was watching her but she didn’t want to look at him. She kept staring at the cluster of high-rise office blocks that made up the Perth city centre, laid out along the low ridge opposite, a serrated silhouette against a clear night sky.

Despite all the lights in the office buildings, there was little sign of life in the city. A few cars moved along Riverside Drive and there was a procession of freeway traffic crossing the Narrows Bridge, but too far away to be heard. From where they sat on the South Perth foreshore the city was completely silent. The police radio in the car crackled to life, and Kavanagh tilted her head to listen, but it only spat out a squawk of static before it went dead and the silence returned.

She turned towards Hackett, confident now that he was enjoying the view of the river. She tried not to look at him except when he was unaware of it. His good looks annoyed her. He was tall, and she preferred men who were taller than her, of the same athletic build. She liked his broad shoulders and his strong jaw, but hated the way that he knew it. He was nearly ten years younger, but sometimes she felt he was from an entirely different time and place.

Somewhere along the line it had become acceptable for men to spend as much time on their appearance as women. She had hoped that equality with male officers would be reached when she was judged solely on her work, rather than her looks, but somehow the opposite had happened, and the men had started spending more time in front of the mirror. She looked at Hackett's hair, shining under the street lamps, and wondered what kind of product he used in it. She put her cup down on the hood of the car, took off her cap, and ran her hand across her scalp. She had cut it short again, and kept it bleached white, so much less trouble under the cap. It stood up on end now, held upright by sweat.

It was three in the morning, but the air was warm and humid, still above twenty degrees. She climbed down off the car and stretched her back, then adjusted her belt. The equipment hanging off it seemed to have doubled in the seven years she had been in plain clothes. After a long shift the weight of the gun, radio, baton, cuffs, Taser and pepper spray left her back stiff and her hips sore. She tugged at her yellow reflective vest, feeling herself sweating under the nylon, and lifted her arms to let the air circulate under them.

'We don't need to wear the hi-viz,' said Hackett, smiling at her over the rim of his coffee cup. 'Not while we're in the car.'

She thought about taking it off, but if she started there she'd soon end up ditching the belt too. She looked down at her shapeless blue cargo pants and combat boots, and



thought about her father in his khaki police uniform, his eyes always hidden in the shade of his broad-brimmed hat. She fidgeted with the baseball cap in her hands, her fingers following the checkerboard pattern around the crown, then fitted it back on her head and sighed.

‘We look like street sweepers,’ she said.

Hackett laughed. ‘Isn’t that what we are?’ he said. ‘Cleaning all the scum off the streets?’

He stroked his chin and narrowed his eyes in a practiced look that he thought was sultry. He had a couple of days of stubble, and she could hear it bristle as he scratched. She noticed the line under his chin where he had shaped the stubble to accentuate the line of his jaw, and he caught her staring. She had to look away.

She picked up the coffee and it had cooled enough for her to drink. She turned her back to the river, looked up at the high-rise condos that loomed above the foreshore, and tried to pick out the apartment they had just attended. She identified the balcony, with its views of the river and the city, and tried to guess how much it was worth. The people that lived there were a childless middle-aged couple, white trash cashed-up bogans who had disturbed their whole floor with a domestic argument, using language that had appalled the neighbours with its vehemence, cruelty and obscenity. After pounding on their door and getting them to tone it down, and asking the bruised husband if he wanted to press charges against the wife, Kavanagh had been forced to listen to the complaints of the neighbours. They wanted to tell her behaviour like that wasn’t acceptable in an executive enclave like theirs.

‘You can write up the report on Liz Taylor and Richard Burton,’ she said to Hackett.

She could see from the dumb look in his eyes that he had missed the reference, but then his eyes brightened and he said, ‘Sure, no problem,’ and crumpled the empty cardboard cup in his hand. He could only have been out of the Academy a year, she

thought, still full of the cocksure arrogance they had poured into him during basic training. They would have had him on the booze bus for six months before letting him out on patrol, and he probably thought this was proper police work. Not that she had ever asked him about his life or his career. He had tried to make small talk on their first day in the car together, but she had cut him off dead. She had no desire to answer his inane questions about why she was back on patrol. He would have heard all the details already in the locker room.

When they put her back in uniform, they had at least only busted her down to Senior Constable, and she was grateful for the small mercy of outranking Hackett. He did what she told him to do, and that included maintaining a respectful silence in the car. He was no doubt trying to make a good impression, aware that he would be coming up for his compulsory country service soon, and a good word from a fellow officer could be the difference between a cushy posting on the coast and some godforsaken hole in the desert.

The radio burst into life again, breaking the silence between them. This time there was a voice, distorted despite the clear night air, and through the open window of the car Kavanagh thought she heard an address she recognized.

She tossed the coffee cup towards a litter bin and it hit the rim and splashed its contents across the grass before dropping in. Her fingers fumbled for the radio handset clipped to the front of her vest. She squeezed the button and spoke. 'Kilo four seven here.'

She waited a second, a slight hiss on the radio, before a female voice said, 'Go ahead, Kavanagh. You still at that domestic on the foreshore?'

'No, we're done,' said Kavanagh, impatient. 'Please repeat the last message.'

'We have a 228 reported at a residence at twenty-three, repeat two-three, Buxton Street, Shenton Park.'

Kavanagh stood for a moment, her breath caught in her throat, and then she said. 'Received. Show us attending.'

She raced around to the driver's door and flung it open, and as she sat down she saw Hackett smoothing his hair and adjusting his cap carefully on his head.

'Get a fucking move on, pretty boy,' she yelled.

He strolled to the passenger door and took his seat beside her. By the time he had his seatbelt fastened Kavanagh was revving the engine and had the lights flashing on the roof.

'Relax, will you?' said Hackett. 'It's another domestic. No need for the blues-and-twos.'

'It's a Violent Disturbance,' she snorted. She had the car in reverse, her elbow on the seat back, looking out of the rear window as she backed away from the curb, the tyres squealing.

When she was out onto the road she pulled the steering wheel hard right and the nose of car swept around. Hackett grabbed at the handle above his door as his body was thrown against the glass. By the time the front wheels had come around and were pointing up Mendis Street Kavanagh had the car in gear and the power down in a perfect J-turn, and she accelerated quickly towards the traffic lights. They shone red but Kavanagh ignored them, drifting the car in a tight right turn and pushing it hard towards the freeway.

Hackett had not taken his eyes off her. She knew he was looking, could imagine the confusion on his face, but kept her eyes on the empty road ahead.

'I know the address,' she said, anticipating his question. 'A friend of mine.' She managed a quick glance at him and his eyebrow was raised, still asking the question. 'Gareth Ford,' she said.

His expression changed quickly to one of surprise and maybe fear, then she gave her attention back to the road. His eyes had told her that he knew the name, had heard it before, part of the stories told about her in the locker room.

The radio came alive again, the voice sounding strained. 'Kilo four-two, stand down.'

Kavanagh ignored it. Hackett reached for the handset mounted on the dashboard but she slapped his hand away.

'Leave it,' she hissed.

'Kilo four-two. Stand down,' the radio insisted. 'Kilo four-niner already in attendance.'

Hackett leaned back into his seat, folded his arms across his chest and was trying to look calm as Kavanagh swung the car around the elevated on-ramp and down on to the freeway. She was smiling, the slightest curl in her lip, as she raced across the Narrows Bridge, over the river and into the shadows between the tall buildings.

## 2.

Buxton Street was dark and narrow, a row of bungalows facing each other, crouched behind low hedges or white picket fences. The street lamps were placed too far apart to be effective; their light obscured by a line of thick peppermint trees planted on either side. Shade in the daytime was more important to the residents than street lighting at night. In daylight it would look the epitome of the middle class Perth suburban dream, but at night it seemed deserted and desolate, with few lights showing in the houses and no movement at all.

When Kavanagh turned into the street she could see that the far end of it was illuminated by flashes of blue light from the police car outside Gareth Ford's house. It was parked diagonally across the verge, the front end pointing directly at the gate in the picket fence, its lights on but no noise. As Kavanagh pulled up alongside her headlights raked the parked car and she could see that it was empty. She turned off her own lights and shut down the engine and was out of the car before Hackett had opportunity to speak.

Ford's house was set back behind a neat square of lawn, a tuck-pointed brick bungalow in the Federation style, a veranda along the front decorated with timber scrollwork. A red Subaru wagon was parked in the driveway beside the house. Kavanagh had seen the house twice before, but had never been invited inside. The first time had been after the Gwardar robbery, on the run with Ford, they had stopped there briefly. Kavanagh had waited in the car while he had run inside to collect his computer, and as she waited she had admired the neat rows of rose bushes that lined the brick path to the front door. Each bush had been carefully shaped into a perfect sphere on its stem, delicate white blooms that matched the white paint on the fence and the timber posts of the veranda. The prim garden was at odds with everything she knew about

Gareth Ford, and when he had stumbled back to the car, his thick hair dishevelled, his face sunburned and the creases around his eyes caked with desert dust, the contrast made her smile.

The second time had been two weeks after they returned from Marble Bar. Ford was back with his wife and daughter under the same roof. Kavanagh had rung the doorbell and stood patiently on the veranda, waiting to serve a summons on Ford's wife, Diane. He had answered the door and she'd known from the look in his eye why he had not returned her phone calls, and never would. He refused to let her see his wife, made her leave the summons with him, and then turned his back on her and closed the door. That had been the last time they spoke.

The gate was open, and so was the front door, light spilling into the garden and illuminating the path between the roses. Kavanagh strode up the path, the scent of the roses hanging thick in the night air, and as she went to step onto the veranda her sleeve caught on the last bush, the thorns jagging on the thin cotton. She swore and pulled her arm free, hearing the sleeve tear and feeling a stab of pain as the thorns raked her forearm. She turned to the light from the doorway, and was wiping the trickle of dark blood from her forearm with the frayed edge of her torn sleeve when Hackett caught up with her. He tried to step past but she raised a hand to stop him, then stepped first onto the veranda, her police boots thumping on the bare wooden boards.

Kavanagh stepped through the front door and found herself at the end of a long hallway, which ran the length of the house, doors opening from it to the left and right. At the far end it opened out into a kitchen and living area, and she could see another officer in the kitchen, leaning against the breakfast counter talking on her phone. Tammy Vukovic, a Senior Constable who was younger than Kavanagh. Short and stocky, her gun belt rested on wide hips that stretched the blue fabric of her cargo pants. Kavanagh knew her from the squad room and the cafeteria, but Vukovic mixed

with a group of younger officers who had passed through the academy together, and she had never asked Kavanagh to drink with them. Vukovic looked up and her eyes widened in recognition, then she tilted her head and waved her hand, beckoning Kavanagh to the back room. Kavanagh strode down the corridor, ignoring each of the closed doors that she passed, keeping her eyes on Vukovic. She had a plain face, curly brown hair tied back but strands falling loose from under her cap. She played with a loose curl as she spoke, her voice hushed, her thick eyebrows knitted together, and Kavanagh expected the worst. Vukovic's frown dissolved into a girlish grin when Hackett walked into the room. She dipped her head and looked at him through her eyelashes and then she remembered the situation and restored her face to a look of professional seriousness.

When she stepped into the living room Kavanagh looked to her left at the gleaming white kitchen that stretched along one wall. Vukovic caught her eye and lifted a finger off her phone and stabbed it towards the other side of the room, which was dominated by a large ornate fireplace with a long couch facing it. A dining table stretched across the far end of the house in front of tall floor-to-ceiling windows that opened onto the garden. One of the doors was ajar.

Kavanagh was so impressed by the space in the room and the expensive furniture that it took her a moment before she noticed the body lying on the couch. She took a couple of steps towards the fireplace so she could see better over the back of the couch, and when she looked down she recognized Diane Ford staring back at her through dead eyes. Kavanagh took in the pale skin, the red hair and the ligature marks on her neck. She was sprawling, one leg hanging off the couch, the other stretched out, the foot turned inwards. One arm was bent above her head, the other lay across her chest.

Kavanagh let out a long breath and tried to compose herself. She decided that the vacuum she felt sucking at her lungs was simple relief that the body on the couch had

not been Gareth Ford, and as soon as she formed his name in her mind the relief turned to panic and her breath caught in her throat. She turned back towards the hallway, pushed Hackett aside, and ran down the corridor.

She put her shoulder to the first door and fumbled for the light switch, finding herself in the master bedroom. It had been ransacked, the drawers tipped out and the wardrobe doors hanging open, the clothes strewn across the floor. A wooden jewellery box on the dresser stood open, the felt trays cast aside empty. The bed was undisturbed, still neatly made, the coverlet pulled tight. She didn't stop long enough for more than a cursory glance, and then she moved to the next room. This was the daughter's bedroom, Grace, seven years old now, and it was undisturbed. She checked the wardrobe and the drawers and they were almost empty, just a few clothes in the bottom drawer and a winter coat hanging up.

The next room was a spare bedroom. The bed was a mess, the doona pushed to the end and the pillow askew. There were men's clothes on the floor but nothing in the drawers besides spare bed linen.

The fourth door opened onto a study, one wall filled with a built-in desk. The filing cabinet under the desk was open and the files scattered across the floor. There was a printer on the desk, but no sign of a computer. Trailing cables suggested it had been taken.

Kavanagh moved quickly to the bathroom and then the laundry, and as she stood in the tiled room by the big steel sink she became aware of her own breathing echoing off the tiled walls. She filled her lungs slowly, concentrating her thoughts on her chest and diaphragm, forcing her heart rate to slow. There was nobody else in the house, Ford and his daughter were elsewhere, and that thought calmed her. She waited until her heart and her breathing were under control and then she stepped out into the corridor and went back to turn the lights out in each room and close the doors. As she looked



down the hallway she saw the movement sensor over the front door. She took a step towards it and the red light winked at her. She found the key pad to the alarm system by the front door. It was not armed and showed no sign of being tampered with.

She walked slowly back into the living room and presented Vukovic with a blank expression. Hackett was at the end of the breakfast bar, his hands behind his back, standing at ease, waiting for someone to tell him what to do.

Kavanagh pointed at the door to the garden and asked Vukovic, 'Was that door open when you arrived?'

Vukovic nodded and Kavanagh said 'You checked the yard?'

Vukovic was still nodding as she put her phone in the top pocket of her shirt. She buttoned it she said, 'I only just called this in. How did you get here so quick?'

Kavanagh looked her in the eye, alert for anything that would tell her how much Vukovic knew of her past with Gareth Ford. 'I recognized the address on the call-out, the burglary.'

Vukovic nodded towards the couch. 'Gone a bit beyond that now,' she said. 'Do you know the vic?'

Kavanagh walked over to the couch and for the first time noticed the cables training from the low built-in cupboards opposite the couch where the electrical gear and television had been taken. She looked down at the body again and said, 'Her name is Diane Ford.'

Vukovic was watching her. 'The unopened mail I found is addressed to Diane Bonner.'

'She's using her maiden name now,' said Kavanagh. 'There is a husband, Gareth Ford, and a daughter, Grace. They're not here. We need to locate them.'

Kavanagh turned to Vukovic and saw the recognition in her eyes at the name. She could see that she was thinking, not sure what to do, wondering how soon a senior

officer would arrive and relieve her of the situation. She looked at Kavanagh and then at Hackett as she considered her options, and then she sighed and fumbled with the pocket where she'd put her phone. 'I need to make another call,' she said as the phone came to life and lit her face with a blue glow.

She put the phone to her ear, turned away from Kavanagh and walked slowly to the dark windows at the end of the room. As she walked away Kavanagh saw the blue latex gloves poking out of the back pocket of Vukovic's pants and cursed under her breath for forgetting her own.

Hackett walked over to the couch and looked at the body, his mouth open, blinking quickly to keep the tears out of his eyes. Kavanagh stepped up next to him and nudged his elbow.

'I need you at the front door,' she said. 'There's going to be a cast of thousands showing up any minute, and we don't want any gate crashers.' She watched him disappear into the corridor and heard his boots thump towards the front door.

She took her time now to examine the body on the couch. She leaned over to get a closer look at the body, catching the smell of something herbal that came off the body. She looked at the eyes first. There was still moisture in them, along with small red dots around the white of the eye, and blood in the conjunctivae, which she recognized as evidence of the petechial haemorrhages common in strangulation. Despite the paleness of her skin, the victim's face was flushed pink, congestion caused by the blockage of the carotid arteries. Kavanagh did not think she had been dead long. There seemed to be no terror in her eyes, not even surprise. Even in death her face was beautiful. Pale skin dotted with freckles across rounded cheekbones. Her mouth was closed, her lips pursed to make a heart shape, flushed a deep pink. Her eyes were as blue as Kavanagh's, but the colour seemed richer, perhaps in contrast to the red of her hair, which fell long and loose around her face and neck, dead straight as if it had been recently brushed. The

ligature mark on her neck was a livid red, a deep furrow pressed into the flesh. There was no pattern in the bruising, nothing to suggest the braid of a rope or the links of a chain. The ligature had been smooth, and Kavanagh glanced at the electrical cables hanging from the cupboard. Her eye followed the shelves to the mantelpiece over the fireplace. There were framed photographs arranged in a row, mostly of the daughter Grace, a pretty blonde girl, smiling in every picture. There was one photograph of Diane Ford, a studio portrait of her looking elegant in a black cocktail dress, her hair pulled tight away from her face, her make-up fixed professionally. Kavanagh wondered what sort of woman might display that kind of picture in her home, and tried to think of the last time anyone had taken a picture of her. Some long forgotten holiday perhaps.

There was no picture of Diane's husband. There would be a wedding photograph somewhere, Kavanagh thought, but it was not on display.

Only now did Kavanagh notice the paint on the wall above the fireplace. When she had first entered the room her eye had registered the red daubs on the wall but she had quickly catalogued it as a piece of abstract art. Now she could see the pale rectangle on the wall where a painting had been removed and in that space two Chinese characters had been sprayed. The work was neat, concise, which is why she had thought it art rather than graffiti. The two characters were equal in size, arranged in a tidy square, done with a narrow spray jet with only the slightest drips running down the wall. Kavanagh looked over her shoulder at Vukovic, who was still talking on the phone, her back turned. Kavanagh took her phone from her pocket, took photos of the body and the graffiti and emailed the images to her private address.

When Kavanagh turned back, slipping her phone into her pocket, Vukovic had finished her call and was looking at the screen on her phone, her forehead creased into a frown. She looked at Kavanagh and the furrows above her eyes got deeper.

'Do you know what these Chinese characters say?' asked Kavanagh.

Vukovic shook her head. 'Forensics will handle it. Where's that pretty boy you came in with?'

Kavanagh jerked a thumb towards the hallway. 'He's on the front door. He might be cute, but he's dumb.'

'Yeah, but look at him. He's got eyelashes like a camel. Mine is dumb too but he's got a face like beans on toast. At least you've got something to look at.'

'Where's yours?' asked Kavanagh. She was talking but she was still looking at the body, taking in the clothes. Diane was wearing loose-fitting cotton pants, pale blue with an elasticated waist. She could see where her plain white T-shirt had ridden up, exposing the white skin of her belly. It didn't look like there had been any attempt at sexual assault. She was dressed for bed, but had never made it there.

'My offsider is next door,' said Vukovic. 'He's talking to the neighbour that found her. She was coming home late, owns a restaurant. She saw the front door was wide open. Said that Bonner never did that, always had the screen door locked. Stuck her head in to check and found this.'

'When was the call?' said Kavanagh. She was looking at the bruising to Diane's shins from where she had kicked the coffee table as she had struggled. She noticed that one leg of her pants was stained dark, and when she leaned to touch it she found it wet. The stain was halfway down the leg and she doubted it was urine. She sniffed her fingers and the smell was floral and faintly familiar.

Kavanagh was so absorbed in her examination that a minute passed before she realized that her question hadn't been answered. She turned around to see Vukovic watching her, concern in her eyes, her thumbs hooked in her belt, fingers fidgeting with the clasp over her handcuffs.

'You shouldn't have come here, Rose,' she said.

Kavanagh had never heard her use her first name before, and was about to say something when Vukovic turned away and walked down the hallway to the front door.

Kavanagh waited for her to step out of sight before she pulled out her phone again. She thumbed through her contact list until she found Gareth Ford's name and then stabbed the call button. She put the phone to her ear and listened to the ring tone. As it rang she leaned over the couch again and took a look at Diane's finger nails. They were trimmed short, polished and neat but not varnished. The nail on the third finger of her right hand was broken, chipped at the corner and split down the middle. Kavanagh could see nothing under the nail. If Diane had clawed at her attacker, she had not found skin or hair. Kavanagh looked at the left hand. The nails were intact but Kavanagh took note that there was no wedding ring on the third finger, and no discolouration or indentation to suggest she'd worn one recently.

Her phone was still purring in her ear when she heard a theatrical cough behind her and when she turned she saw Vukovic and Hackett standing in the doorway.

'Who are you calling?' asked Vukovic. She was trying to sound casual but Kavanagh caught the edge in her voice, the blunt impersonal tone they had been taught to use when talking on the job.

Kavanagh killed the call and put her phone away. 'It rang out,' she said, and looked Vukovic in the eye, waiting to see how she would play it.

Vukovic shuffled her weight, hefted the belt on her hips as if its weight had suddenly become too much of a burden. She glanced at Hackett before she spoke, 'You're wanted back at the station,' she said.

Kavanagh made sure she kept her face in check, trying to maintain eye contact. She stared at Vukovic and waited for the rest of it, but Vukovic looked away.

'You should go now,' said Vukovic. 'Get out of here before the detectives show up. Hackett will take you.'

Kavanagh looked at her partner and he tried to give her a smile, but his charm deserted him. He turned and walked down the corridor and after a moment Kavanagh followed him, nudging Vukovic as she passed.

By the time she had stepped off the veranda Hackett was standing by the car. 'I'm driving,' he said, and this time his smile was real.

She thought about whether this might be their last journey together, and decided to let him have his fun.

### 3.

Gareth Ford took a slow, deep breath, controlling the rise and fall of his chest so that the other players couldn't see his indecision. He resisted the temptation to look at his cards again. He knew what they were and he hated them: the ace of spades and the king of diamonds. Big Slick or the AK47. The hand they called Anna Kournikova, because she looks great but never wins anything.

He found himself looking past the dealer's head at the clock on the far wall, and regretted it. He knew his cards and he knew what time it was: it was four in the morning and the only people left in the casino were the die-hard gamblers, the insomniacs, and people like him who didn't want to go home. The clock was in the centre of a panel of screens showing sports from around the world above the racing book room. It was the only clock allowed in the casino, and was only there so punters knew how long they had to place a bet before the next race. Otherwise the casino was designed with nothing to indicate the passage of time, or even if it was day or night. There were no windows and no fresh air, only stale recycled air blowing limply from the ceiling ducts. The only other way to judge the time of day was by the number of punters and their energy levels, and every face that Ford saw was silently screaming that it was four in the morning.

His attention wandered to the TV screen next to the clock. It was showing a repeat of an English soccer game. He'd seen the match already on the weekend and knew that Everton would score in the eighty-third minute, but still he watched and knew it was a mistake. He shouldn't let his attention wander. He should stay focused on the other players, watch how their fingers played with their cards or their chips, see if they scratched their eyebrows or scrunched their noses. Instead they would be watching him and know how distracted he was. He knew the symptoms of this lack of focus, the point

at which an old game of football was more interesting than the hand of Texas Hold'em in front of him.

The dealer was trying to get his attention now. He looked at her, a cute young woman with Chinese eyes but a broad Australian accent. She looked as tired and bored as he felt, her frustration at working the late shift evident in the tone of her voice. She had her hand out across the table towards him, tapping her fingers impatiently on the green felt.

'The bet is with you,' she said. Ford looked at the chips around the table. He hadn't heard the man on his right raise the bet. The man was young, well-groomed, in a black silk shirt with the top buttons undone and mirrored aviator glasses so nobody could read his eyes. It was a trick he'd probably picked up from watching Vegas professionals on the internet. He thought he was a player. He'd been playing aggressively all night and it had been pissing Ford off. He hated being to the left of hotshots who would raise before the flop on any two cards, forcing Ford to fold too many hands. The guy had raised again, a modest bet, a pot-builder that told Ford nothing. Ford looked at his stack. He had bought in for five hundred dollars and had been losing slowly all night. He had two hundred-dollar chips left and a couple of fives.

'All in,' he said. It had come out of his mouth without him really thinking about the words. It was a dumb bet and he knew it. He seldom went all-in, and never with ace-king unsuited. He was in middle position too, with nothing much in the pot for it to be worth trying to steal it. He'd been playing conservatively all night, putting off the need to go home, so he didn't know why he was so impulsive now. When he got bored he knew it was time to cash in and leave, not make one all-in bet to try to chase his losses and change his luck around. He didn't believe in luck.

The players behind him folded and it came around to the hotshot, who made a pantomime of looking at Ford's stack and then looking at his own, which was four times



as high. He jutted out his chin and called the bet, picking chips off the top of his stack and flipping them onto the table like he was tossing coins to a beggar.

The dealer pulled the chips in and stacked them and then asked both players to show their cards. Ford flipped his cards and as the hotshot reached for his own cards Ford saw the momentary hesitation at seeing the ace-king. He must have thought Ford was bluffing, mis-read his boredom and lack of focus. The hotshot turned over his own cards to show a pair of nines.

The hotshot had called him with a weak hand, but even so his pair put him ahead, and Ford was staring at the weakness of Big Slick: it was still a drawing hand and he needed to hit something.

The dealer laid out the three cards of the flop and when she turned them Ford saw a King and a six and an eight. He had made a pair and where he should have felt joy or relief he still felt empty and jaded.

The hotshot had both hands on the table on either side of his nines, his fingers lightly tapping the felt as if willing his card to come. The turn was a seven and that gave him a possible straight and another eight outs.

They were both holding their breath when the river card was turned. It was the nine of clubs and the hotshot curled his fingers into a ball and pulled back his hand in the smallest of fist pumps, a gesture of triumph at making his set.

Ford kept his eyes on the cards and tried not to react. He didn't want to give the hotshot the satisfaction of even a shrug. He had made a stupid bet on pocket cards that he hated, and been called by an even dumber bet that had beaten him on the last card. Now the idiot beside him was grinning smugly like any part of what had just happened was due to his skill.

Ford watched the dealer push his chips sideways along the table to the player beside him and then stood up, turning his back to the hotshot and walking towards the bar in the sports room.

Ford was the only drinker at the bar and the barmaid looked as bored as the dealer, that same expression of patiently counting the minutes until the night shift was over. She made eye contact with Ford and raised an eyebrow and nodded once when Ford asked for a small beer and a large whisky.

While she tilted the glass beneath the tap Ford pulled his phone from his pocket and looked at the screen. It had been set to silent for the last four hours but he had felt it vibrate several times in his pocket but he had not wanted to look at it and let thoughts of home interrupt his concentration. There were two missed calls from his wife from just after midnight, but no voice message or text. Then there was a missed call from Rose Kavanagh.

The barmaid put his drinks in front of him and Ford found a crumpled note in the bottom of his pocket and left it curled up on the bar. He was taking his first mouthful from the beer and thinking about the last time he had seen Kavanagh when he saw the two uniformed cops walking down the aisle between the poker tables. They both had their phones in their hands and were scanning the tables looking for somebody. The call from Kavanagh now made sense: they were looking for him. The first cop reached the end of the aisle, looked at Ford and then at the phone, and when he turned it to put it back in his top pocket Ford saw his own face on the screen, a personnel photo taken on a mine site during his last full-time job. The image was only a couple of years old, but he looked noticeably younger in it: five kilos heavier, his hair not so grey and his cheeks not nearly as hollow.

‘Gareth Ford?’ the officer asked, and when Ford nodded he said: ‘We need you to come to the station with us.’



#### 4.

They had done three laps of the city in silence, following their standard patrol route, but the radio was off and Hackett was staring straight ahead, not looking at Kavanagh. Eventually Kavanagh felt the need to speak.

‘We’ve passed two incidents already,’ she said. ‘Are we going to do our jobs or just joy-ride?’

Hackett kept his eyes on the road. ‘I’m to keep you in the car for an hour,’ he said, ‘then I’ve got to take you back to the station.’

‘On whose orders?’ asked Kavanagh.

‘The Gorgon,’ said Hackett.

Kavanagh was impressed that she was worthy of such high-ranking attention. ‘What else did Inspector Gorman say?’

Hackett shrugged. ‘Vukovic spoke with her.’

There were a few cars and taxis on the street, night clubbers and late drinkers staggering towards the night buses and the taxi rank, passing the first of the early risers and commuters coming into town. Kavanagh checked her watch. ‘It’s nearly four. You better take me in.’

As they cruised down Wellington Street she saw a fight outside the railway station, two drunks squaring up to one another, a little guy butting chests with a heavy set man in a leather jacket. They lost their balance, stumbling towards the road. Hackett had his eyes on the road, so Kavanagh wound down her window. ‘Give it a rest, boys,’ she yelled as they passed.

The small one had a foot in the gutter, his flannel shirt torn open, the buttons gone and his chest bare. He turned his head to see where the shout had come from, dropping his hands when he saw the police car, and caught a looping right hook from his

opponent, the punch snapping his head around and sending him spinning into the street behind the car.

Kavanagh laughed and wound up her window, watching in her door mirror as the brawlers reconnected, swinging wildly.

They approached East Perth station along Hay Street, the light towers of the cricket ground silhouetted against a yellow night sky.

Hackett swung the car into the driveway that passed beneath the Watch House and waited for the steel gate to open. He drove into the yard and parked at the end of a line of police vans, the curved concrete façade of the nine-storey headquarters building looming above them. Most of the building was dark, just a few rows of lights showing from the lower floors. As Kavanagh went to unbuckle her seatbelt Hackett put out a hand to stop her.

‘Wait,’ he said. He got out and walked around to Kavanagh’s door and opened it, standing back to let her get out. As she stood up she found herself face to face with him, his eyes a few inches above hers, looking down at her. She could smell his breath: a whiff of stale gas station coffee that he had tried to cover by sucking a mint. She heard it rattle against his teeth when he spoke. ‘I have to escort you to Gorman’s desk,’ he said. ‘Don’t make this harder for me than it already is.’

She looked at his young face and smiled. She was tempted to string it out, have fun with him, but it would have felt like tormenting a puppy. ‘Did they give you the option of cuffing me?’ she said.

He smiled at that. ‘Come on,’ he said, and took her by the elbow and guided her towards the back door of the office block.

There was a single light pole between them and the back door, and the pool of light beneath it had been designated the smoking area, marked out with a yellow rectangle painted on the bitumen with a bollard at each corner that contained an ash bin. Two

figures in plain clothes were leaning against the pole as Kavanagh and Hackett approached, tilting their heads towards each other. One man was tall and heavy, broad shoulders casting a long shadow. The man with him was older, his shoulders hunched. At the sound of boots approaching they stopped talking and the older man turned to look at the two officers in uniform, lifting his head so that the light fell on his face. Kavanagh recognized his quiff of white hair immediately.

The last time she had seen Bill Chadwick had been in an aircraft hangar, and he had been pointing a gun at her. He was still a Detective Inspector then, in charge of the Criminal Investigation Branch, and working to protect Alan McCann. She had expected to see him again at the inquiry into the Gwardar gold robbery, but they had never given evidence on the same day. She had wanted to hear his testimony, see how far up the chain of command the cover-up might go, but Chadwick had put pressure on the prosecutors, had insisted on a closed court, so she never got to hear his lies. By the time the inquest was over Chadwick had retired and the Chief Constable had gone on television to say that he could not investigate any allegations of misconduct against Chadwick now that he was no longer a serving officer. The last she had heard, they had found Chadwick a soft public service job with the State Emergency Services, and were paying him his entire police pension. He was still seen drinking with his old cronies in the detective squad, kept in the loop, offering his advice off the record.

Chadwick blew out a stream of smoke and put his cigarette in his mouth, the tip glowing as he sucked on it and stared at Kavanagh, then he nudged the man beside him, who looked up. His hair was cropped short on his head, and one of his ears had been mangled into a cauliflower, and she recognized him as Detective Constable Paul Morton, one of Chadwick's old inner circle.

Kavanagh stopped walking as she passed them, turning to face Chadwick and feeling the muscles in her arms tense. She stretched her fingers and then clenched both

hands into fists. Morton smiled at her, showing her the gaps between his teeth, his grin slowly turning into a leer as he saw the anger in her face. She took a step towards him but felt Hackett's grip on her bicep tighten. She took another step and Hackett slipped his arm inside her elbow, across her back to grab the opposite arm, pulling her towards him and arching her back, twisting her towards the fan of light spilling out of the entrance to the station.

She looked over her shoulder at Chadwick as she walked away and he raised his hand to his temple, giving her a mock salute, the cigarette still burning between his fingers.

As Hackett pushed her through the door she could hear them laughing, then Chadwick coughed, the raw bark echoing off the bare concrete walls that surrounded the yard.

Hackett kept hold of Kavanagh as he punched in the security code to the inner door, and when it unlocked with a soft click he pushed her inside.

She blinked as she stepped into the white corridor, her eyes hurt by the harsh strip lighting. She knew the way to Gorman's office, but she waited for Hackett to work out where he was going. He turned her away from the duty desk, nodding to the sergeant on the ghost roster, and pushed her towards the lifts. He still looked confused by the standoff with Chadwick, knowing enough stories about the former chief of detectives to be in awe of him, but without enough experience to know how to deal with the situation. Not wanting to advertise his ignorance, he kept quiet and avoided eye contact with Kavanagh as he pushed the button to call the lift.

They rode up in silence, watching the numbers light up above the door. 'You can let go of my arm now,' said Kavanagh, as the doors opened. When Hackett let his hand drop from her elbow, she was ready, and she had taken three long strides down the corridor before Hackett could react. She took a quick look at him over her shoulder. He

was hurrying, trying to match her long gait and look cool about it, but not daring to break into a run to catch her. Gorman's office was halfway along the building on the river side, and she opened the door without knocking. She was inside, with the door firmly closed, before Hackett caught up with her. She saw the door knob turn, but then he thought twice about following her inside.

She stood with her back to the door facing the desk where Gorman sat, waiting for her to look up. She was taking her time, staring intently at her computer screen, her right hand on the mouse, moving and clicking. She was wearing loose pants and a hooded sweatshirt, her hair loose. They had woken her and Kavanagh wondered how long she'd been at her desk. Gorman sighed to herself and then looked up at Kavanagh, who was standing loosely at ease, her back straight and her hands linked behind her. She looked Gorman in the eye and said, 'You wanted to see me, ma'am?'

Gorman raised herself out of her chair and looked down at Kavanagh. She was an imposing woman, at least four inches taller than Kavanagh. Her hair was cut short, died brown but grey showing at the roots. Her face showed every one of the twenty years she'd been in uniform, loose skin hanging beneath her eyes, her cheeks slack above colourless lips. Gorman stared at Kavanagh without speaking until she had lost some of her boldness and started fidgeting with the equipment on her belt.

'You don't look comfortable in uniform,' said Gorman.

Kavanagh looked down at her shirt, which was rumpled with sweat stains under the arms and dust ground into the seams. 'It's been a while, ma'am. More equipment to carry now,' she said, pulling up the belt and shifting its weight on her hips. 'Is this a disciplinary interview?'

Gorman shook her head. 'Don't let's get ahead of ourselves. Why were you in Shenton Park?'



Kavanagh stared at her for a moment, wondering where she was going to take this, then she said, 'I was attending the call.'

'But you weren't the closest to the scene. You were told to stand down.'

Kavanagh didn't have an answer for that, and Gorman knew it. Kavanagh wondered how long she would keep going with questions she already knew the answers to.

'The call was for a burglary,' said Gorman. 'That doesn't require two cars.'

'I had a hunch.'

'A hunch that there was a murder?'

'I know the victim, sir,' said Kavanagh. 'And you know that.'

Gorman sat down again and folded her arms, keeping her eyes on Kavanagh. She sighed. 'You know you shouldn't have gone there.'

Kavanagh regained some of her boldness. 'I knew Diane Ford,' she said. 'I was her arresting officer in Marble Bar. Any incident at her house is going to be related to the Gwardar robbery.'

'The records say that her arresting officer was PC Matthew Saxon.'

'That was a matter of practicality, ma'am.'

Gorman smiled at that. 'That's a nice way of putting it. You were under suspension at the time, which is why you're in uniform now. You're no longer a detective.'

'I thought I could be of help.'

'You know that the opposite is true. A prior relationship with the victim precludes you from the investigation.'

'I didn't know she was dead when we got the call.'

'You went into the house without wearing gloves. You tampered with the scene, left your own prints, hair and fibres.'

'No more than the other officers in that house.'

‘That’s not what they say. They said you took pictures with your phone. They heard the shutter noise. You should have put it on silent.’

Kavanagh thought about Vukovic standing in the hallway using her phone, and wondered how much she had agreed with Gorman. ‘My dabs and DNA are easy enough to eliminate from the forensics,’ she said.

‘Maybe, but that’s not the point. You realise that if we ever collar anyone for this, that you’re giving their lawyer a free kick? An officer with a previous history with the victim, who has contaminated the crime scene. You’ve made any physical evidence from the scene inadmissible.’

‘That’s bullshit.’

‘This lack of respect that you project, it doesn’t help your situation.’

‘Respect and deference are two different things, ma’am. Too often mistaken for each other.’

‘You’re not making it easy for me to help you here.’

‘Is that what you think you’re doing, helping me?’

‘If I wasn’t then this really would be a disciplinary hearing.’

‘You’re putting me on suspension again?’

‘That would only bring attention to the situation,’ said Gorman. ‘How long since you got back from suspension after your solo act in Marble Bar?’

‘Three months.’

‘Why didn’t you resign?’

‘Because too many people wanted me to.’

‘So you went back into uniform?’

‘And you put me on the ghost roster. I’ve been working nights this whole time.’

Gorman let out a long slow breath and leaned forward on her desk, looking up at Kavanagh through her dark eyebrows. ‘When they put you back in uniform and gave

you to me your squad chief told me you were a good officer. He told me you were smart. The Gold Squad suited you, out there in the desert, working without a partner. I expect your independence and initiative would be an asset out there in the bush. I wasn't sure how much use they would be in the city. You're still swaggering around like you're the only badge in a one-horse town.'

'I'd be more use in plain clothes.'

Gorman snorted. 'Didn't you ever wonder why you were passed over, given the crap assignments?'

'Yeah, me and every other female officer.'

Gorman looked down at her knuckles, composing herself, before she said, 'We're going to forget that you were ever at the house. Any forensic traces of you that show up we are going to dismiss as being from your knowing the victim and visiting the house previously.'

'You're asking me to lie?'

'I'm asking you to look after your own skin,' said Gorman. 'To ignore the mistake you made tonight.'

'And what about Vukovic and Hackett? Why did they bring this to you?'

'Because I asked them to keep an eye on you.'

'There are other people that know.'

'Just you and me,' said Gorman, 'and that will be settled here.'

'What about the dispatch officers that asked me to stand down? And Vukovic was speaking to someone before she spoke to you, the duty sergeant maybe. This will keep spreading, what you're doing.'

'I'm confident that we can keep it tight, if we work quickly.'

'What about Chadwick?'

Gorman froze at the mention of the name. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Kavanagh said, 'I just saw him in the yard. Why's he here?'

Gorman's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Who was he talking to?'

'He was with Morton, that fat fuck from homicide. I'd say he was being brought up to speed, and the way he looked at me I'd say he knew that I knew.'

'And what is that?'

'That this is something to do with the Gwardar robbery.'

'You can't go chasing after that. The gold was found, the case is closed.'

'So why is Chadwick at this station?'

'The detectives that used to work for him still ask his advice.'

'At four in the morning? He gets out of bed to hold Morton's hand? I don't think so.'

'More conjecture, Constable?'

Kavanagh was smiling now, pleased with herself for getting Gorman off-balance. 'Chadwick was looking after Alan McCann. All the way through the Gwardar robbery. They put the bikies in the frame for the robbery.'

'You hold yourself to some tough standards. Threatening to turn whistle-blower against Chadwick was the wrong move.'

'Because everyone closed ranks around him.'

'I would have thought you'd want to help in this situation, if it leads to your friend's killer.'

Kavanagh frowned. 'She wasn't my friend.'

'But Gareth Ford, he's your friend.'

Kavanagh nodded and took a step forward. 'You could call him that. I'd like to be the one to tell him about his wife's death.'

Gorman looked her straight in the eye. 'He knows, we told him.'

'He wasn't at his house. I tried ringing him. His phone was off.'

'We found him. We did a cell-site.'

'Seems a lot of trouble to find a next-of-kin.'

'The spouse is always the first suspect.'

Kavanagh stepped forward and put her hands on the desk, leaning towards Gorman.

'Where did you find him?'

Gorman stood up again, standing over her. Kavanagh could smell cigarette smoke on her breath. 'Stay out of it,' Gorman said, her voice barely a whisper.

'Was he on the run?'

'We brought him in for questioning.'

'Which is why you kept me circling in the car. I'd like to talk to him.'

'We checked Ford's phone when we picked him up,' said Gorman. 'The last calls on it were from you.'

'As I said, he's a friend.'

'And a person of interest until we interview him.'

'Maybe I could sit in on the interview.'

Gorman tried to hold back a laugh. 'You're not understanding what's going on here.'

Kavanagh stepped back, put her arms behind her back again, tried to relax. 'He has a daughter, Grace,' she said. 'She's six years old, maybe seven now. Why wasn't she at the house?'

'She is with her mother's parents. She's been there for the last week.'

Kavanagh nodded, remembering the empty wardrobe and the unused bed, and started to unbuckle her belt. She took it off and held it up by one end, looking at her gun and her cuffs.

'If you're going to shut me out of the investigation, then I guess I'm on my own.'

'You can't just walk out of here.'

'Watch me,' she said, laying the belt across Gorman's desk and putting her cap on top of it. 'I'll get my union rep to do the paperwork, and if Hackett is still skulking outside the door, I'll get him to escort me out of the building.'

'We'll need to question you.'

'Tell me when. I'll get a union lawyer.'

'Those pictures you took, are they still on your phone?' Gorman asked.

Kavanagh shook her head slowly. 'I emailed them. You can get a warrant for the phone, if you like.'

Gorman shrugged. She made to walk around her desk, then decided there was nothing she could do. 'You wouldn't quit before. Why are you doing it now?' she said.

Kavanagh was already at the door. 'Because this time nobody asked me to,' she said.

## 5.

Kavanagh was halfway down the corridor to the lift before Hackett caught up with her, trying hard not to show that he was breathing hard. She let him walk beside her, enjoying the look on his face as he tried to work out what had happened in Gorman's office. She figured he was too trusting to have eavesdropped.

She was nearly at the lift when she heard a cough, a deep rattling hack that echoed off the bare walls. She recognized it as Chadwick and it stopped her dead. Hackett opened his mouth to speak but she raised her hand to cut him off, then put a finger to her lips as she tilted her head, waiting for another sound. The blood was pumping in her ears as she waited, then she heard Chadwick laugh. She turned her head to gauge the direction and tracked the source to an office door with a small rectangle of wired glass at eye level.

She stepped lightly up to the door and peered through the glass. The room was bare except for a small square table with four chairs. Chadwick was sitting opposite a younger man, who had his back to the door. Kavanagh could only see the back of his head, blond hair longer than regulation, touching the collar of his suit jacket. She rattled the door knob and at the sound the younger man turned his head enough for her to see his face before she ducked her head out of sight.

She knew him: his name was Butcher, another detective from Chadwick's old squad. She had met him once before in an interview room in Coolgardie, helping Chadwick extract a confession from Gareth Ford. She turned on her heels and strode off towards the lift, turning over this new information, trying to make connections.

She pressed the button for the lift and turned to face Hackett. He was looking down at her waist, wondering where her belt and gun were, a question hanging on his lips.

'I quit,' she said, before he could speak.

The doors opened and she stepped inside. Hackett was still in the corridor, his mouth open. She reached between the doors, grabbed him by his belt, and pulled him into the lift.

‘You’re escorting me out of the building,’ she said.

He kept staring at her, then finally framed a question.

‘Did you jump or were you pushed?’ He smiled then, proud that he had worked it out.

Kavanagh sighed. ‘Does it matter?’ she said, as the doors opened at the ground floor and she took off again, her boots squeaking on the polished tiled floor.

She strode past the duty desk and gave a loose wave to the desk sergeant, and kept going towards the locker rooms. She put her shoulder to the door of the women’s change room and barged it open, letting it swing back hard on Hackett. He stopped it with the flat of his hand and stood in the doorway, looking down the long line of lockers to where Kavanagh was jamming the key into hers. She pulled open the metal door and when she turned to him he was looking her up and down.

‘Where’s your gun and equipment?’ he asked.

‘It’s with my badge and my hat, on Gorman’s desk.’

She unbuttoned her pants and started pulling her shirt free of the waistband.

‘I can get a female officer to take care of you if you need to get changed,’ said Hackett.

Kavanagh shrugged. ‘There’s just the two of us here. It might be the last time you get to stare at my tits.’

Hackett frowned and took a step back into the corridor, letting the door close, then had second thoughts and flung it back open. Kavanagh smiled at him and then turned her attention to the locker. Her jeans and T-shirt were on a hanger with her leather jacket draped over the top. She had a small sports bag on the shelf with a change of



underwear, her gym kit and wash bag. She lifted it down and behind it found what she was looking for: an expanding steel baton. She had taken it off a bouncer outside a nightclub in Northbridge. It was a telescoping model, only nine inches long when collapsed, but with a simple flick of the wrist it would extend to three times that length. She'd found it hanging from the bouncer's belt down the inside of his pants during a routine pat-down, and confiscated it. He'd known it was illegal and gave it up without comment. At the end of her shift she'd put it in her locker rather than putting it into evidence, thinking there might be a day like today when she would need it.

She left it on the edge of the shelf while she bent over and undid the laces on her boots, stepping out of them and putting them in the bottom of her locker. She pushed down her pants, letting her shirt tails hang loose and cover her underwear. She pulled on the jeans and fastened them, then started to unbutton her shirt. Hackett's eyes followed her hands down her shirt from button to button, and when she reached the bottom she pulled the shirt open a little, showing him the white skin of her belly and the black material of her bra.

'You can look away now, pretty boy,' she said.

He smiled at her but when she didn't return it he turned slowly in the doorway, putting his back to her and leaning his shoulder against the door to keep it open.

Kavanagh whipped off her shirt, slipped the baton down the back of her jeans and put on her T-shirt. She pulled the hem of it down to cover the baton poking from her waistband. She was pushing her feet into her red cowboy boots when Hackett looked over his shoulder to check on her.

'Nearly there,' she said as she put on her leather jacket and checked the pockets for her phone and wallet. She scooped up her uniform and jammed it into the gym bag, then pushed it into the locker and closed the door, pulling out her keys and tucking them in her pocket.

'You going to leave the bag?' asked Hackett.

Kavanagh nodded. 'Get the union rep to sort it out.' She pushed past Hackett and made for the door into the yard, not looking to see whether he was following. As she pushed open the door and walked out of the building, she felt the tears well up in her eyes and she lowered her head and kept walking.

She passed along the line of police vans and patrol cars until she reached the far side of the yard, where her Ducati was parked in the shadows. She lifted her helmet off the seat and pulled it over her head, and was about to throw her leg over the bike when Hackett put a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head.

'Walk it out,' he said, raising his voice so she could hear him through the helmet. She rocked the bike off its stand and pushed it, following him towards the steel gates onto the street. Hackett swiped his card and the exit gate opened, and he stood with his back against it and waved Kavanagh through, then stepped back to let it close, leaving her on the outside. She turned to look at him as the gate swept in front of him, and he gave her a small finger wave as he disappeared from sight.

Kavanagh straddled the bike and pushed the ignition, and grinned as the big motor purred into life. She put it in gear, twisted the throttle until the engine screamed, and then let out the clutch, hearing the tyres chirp as she pulled away, the whine of the engine echoing off the concrete walls of the police station and shattering the silence of the night. She accelerated down the street, making plenty of noise, letting Hackett know she was gone.

She raced to the end of the street and braked, stepping down through the gears to make the right turn that took her around the front of the station past the main entrance. As she came under the street lights in front of the imposing curved concrete façade she put the bike in neutral, killed the engine and the lights and coasted to a stop in the shadow of a cluster of pine trees that crowded the grass verge. She let the momentum

take her up the kerb and into the trees, then stopped, leaned her shoulder against the trunk of a tree and waited in the shadows for Chadwick.

There was a chance that he might leave by the back gate as she had, and it would be impossible to watch that route without being seen, but she was sure that he would be parked at the front. His arrogance wouldn't let him park in the yard; he'd want to walk through the front door, make a grand entrance and be seen. He would shake hands and backslap old colleagues, let them know he was still in the game.

She only had to wait twenty minutes before he appeared, the overhead lights bouncing off his wave of white hair as he pushed through the doors and paused on the steps to light a cigarette. She heard him cough and her eyes followed the glowing cigarette across the car park. He found an old white Commodore and when he unlocked the door and started the engine Kavanagh dropped the visor on her helmet and started her bike. When he pulled out of the car park she bumped her bike down the kerb and followed him.

She tailed him east across the causeway, the first light of dawn showing behind the silhouette of the Perth Hills, and the river a perfect mirror reflecting the last stars. Chadwick indicated left and she followed him around the feeder road and on to Great Eastern Highway towards the casino. The roads were quiet but the casino was still fully lit and the car park half full. She expected him to turn in but he continued under the rail bridge and made a sudden right turn without indicating, turning away from the casino and into the grid of suburban streets that stretched through Lathlain. She made the turn behind him and once among the dark side streets she turned off her lights in case he was checking his mirrors.

He made two turns before he pulled into an anonymous brick and tiled bungalow, the house dark, not a single light showing. He parked the Commodore in the wide driveway beside a battered old station wagon.

Kavanagh was fifty metres behind him when he stopped, and once he turned off his motor the sound of her Ducati would have been impossible to miss. Any idea she had of being inconspicuous was gone, so she pulled back on the throttle and swung the bike into the driveway behind Chadwick's car. She killed the engine and kicked down the stand and as she stepped off the bike she saw Chadwick standing between the two cars watching her. She took off her gloves and laid them on the seat of the bike, but decided to keep her helmet on.

He looked calm as she walked up to him, almost as if he had been expecting her. He folded his arms and leaned back against the station wagon, and fumbled in the top pocket of his jacket for his cigarettes.

When she was three paces from him Kavanagh reached into the waistband of her jeans and pulled out the steel baton. She snapped her arm down and flicked her wrist and the baton extended to its full length with a solid click. Kavanagh then lifted her right arm up and laid the tip of the baton on her shoulder, ready to strike, her left fist raised in front of her face in a blocking stance. She bounced on the balls of her feet and waited for Chadwick to acknowledge what was coming.

Chadwick found his cigarettes and put one in his mouth. When he flicked his lighter the flame lit his face as she could see how nervous his eyes were. The tip of his cigarette quivered and the flame danced even though the air was still. He inhaled deeply and held the smoke down until he coughed, then blew it out in a long thin stream.

'When I saw you at the station I figured you'd come looking for me,' he said.

Kavanagh flipped open her visor so she could speak. 'What were you doing at the station tonight?'

'Catching up with old friends,' said Chadwick.

'On the night shift?'

'You get to my age, you can't sleep,' said Chadwick.

'Guilty conscience?' said Kavanagh.

'Prostate and bladder,' said Chadwick.

Kavanagh kept her defensive stance. She knew she had him scared but she didn't trust him. His hand snaked inside his jacket and when she saw it she took a step forward. 'Keep your hands where I can see them,' she said.

'I'm retired,' he said. 'You think I walk around armed?'

'Maybe tonight you do,' said Kavanagh. 'Diane Ford is dead.'

'Diane Bonner. She's been using her maiden name for two years.'

'What did you have to do with it?'

'Don't be stupid.'

'You're still looking after McCann, protecting him.'

Chadwick made to put his cigarettes in his inside pocket and when his hand appeared he had a gun in his hand, a small snub-nose .38. As soon as Kavanagh saw the metal reflect the faint street light she lunged forward, blocking his gun hand with her left wrist and bringing down the baton in a sharp arc that connected with the meat of his forearm directly on the median nerve. Chadwick cursed and dropped the gun, his hand momentarily paralysed. Kavanagh punched him between the eyes with her left fist then ducked low under his swinging left hook, letting his elbow glance off her helmet. She flicked the baton into his leg, this time connecting with the tibial nerve in the centre of Chadwick's calf. His leg buckled and his balance went and as he started to topple Kavanagh put both hands on his shoulders and pushed him back hard against his car. He slid down the door and sat heavily on the ground.

While he was catching his breath, rubbing his forearm, Kavanagh bent over to pick up the gun, and as she slipped it into the pocket of her jacket she leaned over Chadwick and spoke directly into his face. 'Retirement doesn't seem to have changed you,' she said. 'You're still connected. Are you still pulling strings at the station?'

Chadwick didn't look up. 'I've still got enough pull to make you go away.'

'Not right now you don't.' She punched him again in the face, a low uppercut with her left that caught him on the cheek as he turned his head away.

'No, but I've been a cop long enough to know how to take a beating,' said Chadwick, 'and tomorrow I'll be back, and your career will be over.'

'You're too late,' said Kavanagh. 'I resigned. This isn't police business any more. You retired, I quit. No rank any more.'

'So this is payback?'

'Maybe, said Kavanagh. 'But mostly this is just a bit of stress release. Getting my kicks by beating the shit out of an old man. How many times have you taken a beating from a woman?'

She hit him again, this time with an open palm, slapping his face back towards her, making him look at her.

'This isn't my first time,' he said. 'I've been beaten up by harder women than you.'

'Did you get me suspended after the Gwardar robbery?'

'I'd like to take the credit for that, but it wasn't me. They wanted it all whitewashed. They suspended you, but you wouldn't take the hint and quit.'

'Well, this is the penny finally dropping,' she said, and swiped his upper arm with the baton. As he raised his other hand to protect his face she backhanded his other arm, the tip connecting with his shoulder. When he had stopped sucking air and had control of his pain she said, 'What did you have to do with this?'

'Why would I do a dumb thing like get her killed?' he said.

'Because she betrayed Alan McCann. She sold him out to the Lau family. He was living in their hotel in Macau, laundering his money through their casino.'

'I heard you were the one that arrested her.'

'She agreed to testify against McCann in return for immunity.'

Chadwick snorted. 'She had nothing on him,' he said.

'She knew where his money was hidden offshore.'

'The receivers went looking for it. As soon as he knew Diane had left him, Alan moved it all. From Macau to The British Virgin Islands and then Lichtenstein. They were never going to get anywhere near it.'

'Do you still have enough influence to have the protection officers taken off the Ford house?'

'They were taken off her last week, when her information about McCann proved to be worthless.'

'I saw the crime scene. It had Roth's style all over it. Make it look like a home invasion, tag the graffiti on the wall. Pin it on some lowlife street gang. This is the same method he used to put the bikies in the frame for the Gwardar robbery. But that's not how the Asian gangs work. They don't leave a calling card. They attack other Asians, recent migrants who don't trust the police. They keep it within the community. Kidnap, ransom, blackmail, not a clumsy murder during a robbery.'

'I haven't been to the house.'

'So what do you know?'

Chadwick sighed. 'I got a call from Morton as soon as he heard. I came down to find out what I could from the guys at the station.'

'No, even if McCann had nothing to do with this, it doesn't look good for him. You're not going to minimize blowback on him.'

'You have him wrong,' said Chadwick. 'He's going to be gutted when he finds out about this. He was staggering when she left him, this will knock him down.'

'Roth is quite capable of playing games.'

'Alan doesn't know yet. As soon as it's daylight I'm going to go tell him.'

'Where is he?'

'He's at the hotel, the Penglai Island.'

'He's still in Macau?'

'No, the Lau family have a hotel in Perth by the same name.'

'Let's go see him,' said Kavanagh, raising the baton again.

'Don't be stupid. You won't get in there, even with me by your side. That place is screwed down tight.'

'Is Roth with him?'

'Roth is Alan's close protection. There's a lot more security been drafted in to the hotel.'

'To protect McCann?'

'No,' said Chadwick. 'The Lau family are here.'

'Why?'

'That, I don't know.'

'Well, I guess I'm going to have to find out.'

'Why do you care?' asked Chadwick.

'Unfinished business.'

'That's right. I heard that you and Ford were a tag team in Marble Bar. Did you have a thing going?'

'Not after I arrested his wife. I haven't seen him in six months.'

Kavanagh walked away to her bike, and Chadwick slowly got to his feet.

'You can give me my gun back now,' he said, his breathing laboured.

Kavanagh bent over and pressed the tip of the baton in to the concrete. She leaned on it and it collapsed into the handle. She slipped it into her left pocket, and put her other hand in the pocket with the gun, her finger on the trigger.

'I'm going to keep hold of this,' she said, 'and if I see you anywhere near me or Gareth Ford, I'm going to shoot you in the gut with it.'





## 6.

By the time she had ridden back across the Swan River to her apartment in East Perth the eastern horizon was lit orange with the approaching dawn, the light bouncing off the sleek surface of the of the river. She parked the bike in the undercroft and rode the lift up to the fifth floor and when she put the key in her door she hesitated. She put her hand in her pocket and grabbed Chadwick's gun, her thumb finding the safety and releasing in. She held her breath as she turned the key and pushed open the door, shaking her head at her own paranoia.

There was enough daylight leaking into the room around the edges of the window blinds for her to see that the living room and kitchen were empty. She crept across the living room and nudged open the door to her bedroom and stuck her head in. It was clear, as was the bathroom, her tiny flat as empty as it was every day when she got home from work. She let out her breath in a slow hiss as she walked to the living room window and pulled back the blinds, squinting into the daylight, the sun now above the horizon and shining horizontal orange light into her face. She slid open the glass door and stepped out onto the balcony, closing her eyes and enjoying the warmth of it on her eyelids. She opened them to look out across the roofs of the surrounding buildings to the river beyond. On the far side was the casino, still burning enough lights to compete with the encroaching daylight, and beyond it the suburbs stretched to the dark line of the Perth Hills. This was normally her favourite time of day, her shift over, the air cool, but today the world looked empty and strange.

She had bought the place seven years ago, when she had first passed her detective exam and got her first posting in plain clothes. She had bought it off the plans, one of many apartment complexes that were being thrown up as part of the East Perth re-development. Higher density housing close to the city designed to appeal to young

urban professionals and absentee landlords, and she had considered herself both. She had bought in the tallest block so she could get a glimpse of the river, but in the seven years when she was moving from station to station, in country postings and then in the Gold Squad in Kalgoorlie, she had put all her savings and overtime into it. With the additional income from the tenant's rent, she had nearly paid it off, but in all that time she had only considered it an investment, a nest egg for the time when she would be ready to settle down, when she could sell it and move to a house. She had never imagined living here, and certainly never alone.

She went back inside, across to the bathroom and turned on the taps over the bath. She poured in a generous dose of salts and a dash of scented oil and watched the bubbles start to foam beneath the steaming stream of water. She returned to the kitchen and flipped the switch on the kettle. As it started to hiss and rumble she emptied the pockets of her jacket.

She took out the gun first. It was a small Smith and Wesson Airweight revolver, not much bigger than her hand, with a short barrel and only five .38 rounds in the little cylinder. The hammer was shrouded, making it the perfect concealed carry, with nothing to snag on clothing if you need to pull it quickly and the aluminium frame keeping it light. She saw that the serial number had been filed off, meaning that Chadwick had got the gun the same way she had found her baton. She flipped the safety back on and put the gun carefully on the kitchen counter, then laid the baton beside it.

She took out her phone and brought the screen to life with her thumb. There were no messages or missed calls. She found Ford's number again and called it. This time it went through to voice mail, a standard message with a soul-less female voice that said: 'You have reached the voicemail of....' There was a long pause before Gareth Ford said his name in a voice that sounded both bored and frustrated. The female voice then continued until the beep. Kavanagh hesitated before deciding to leave a message.

‘It’s Kavanagh,’ she said. ‘Call me when you get this.’

He would see the number of missed calls from her number, so the message was pointless, but somehow she felt better for having spoken to him, even in such a remote way. It was so long since she had spoken to him that his English accent seemed unfamiliar, this quiet man who didn’t like recording his own voice, or having his photograph taken. She would have the whole of the day and the next night to find him. She put her phone and keys beside the gun and took off her jacket and hung it over the back of one of the chairs, four of them sat facing a small square dining table. She had never made a meal for anyone but herself in this apartment, and looking around it now she realised there was nothing in it that expressed her personality in any way. The furniture was all plain, white, functional and modern. She had bought it all in one batch from a warehouse store on the edge of the city, and they had delivered it and assembled it for her while she was working. It had been chosen from the catalogue, the complete interior as shown on page 23. It was not for her benefit, but something cheap and anodyne and robust for rental tenants. There were no paintings or photographs on the walls, only a handful of books on an empty shelf and the clothes in her wardrobe that gave any clue as to who might live here.

She had begun to think of Perth as her home, more attractive than Kalgoorlie or the Wheatbelt towns she had grown up in, but now, in the quiet of the early morning in an empty bare apartment, she felt alone.

The kettle clicked off and she dropped a camomile teabag in a plain white cup and filled it with hot water.

She left it to steep and sat down on the dining chair and pulled off her boots and socks, putting her bare feet on the cool tiles and flexing her toes. She stood up and undid her jeans, and pushed them down along with her panties and stepped out of them, and pulled her shirt up over her head. She unclasped her bra and tossed it on the

table, then picked up her cup of tea with the tag still hanging over the side, and walked naked to the steamy bathroom, where the bubbles had reached the lip of the bath.

She put down the cup and turned off the taps, then put a foot into the water, wincing at the heat. She bit her lip and forced herself to hold it under until she got used to it. Stepping into the bath and putting down her other foot, she then lowered herself slowly into the water, sucking in air as she immersed herself. She sat down and stretched out her legs, letting herself slide under the water an inch at a time, the temperature at the very limit of her tolerance, at the edge of pain. Her skin flushed pink and she felt the blood rush to her face, and the steam draw sweat from her forehead. She took a deep breath and when she let it out she blew out all the stress of her day with it.

Kavanagh leaned forward and picked up her tea cup, then laid back and rested it on her chest, holding it in both hands and looking at the bruising on her knuckles, the skin lifting off and blood showing in a graze. She should have kept her gloves on if she knew she was going to hit him. The steam from the tea rose up under her nose, and the smell triggered a memory. The floral fragrance that she had smelled on Diane had been camomile tea. She must have spilled it on herself in the struggle. Kavanagh hadn't seen a cup on the coffee table, but it might have rolled under the couch or the table. Kavanagh slid further under the bubbles, feeling her fatigue wash over her, her eyes heavy.

Diane had got changed ready for bed, made a cup of tea and relaxed on the couch. Maybe she had been drowsy too. Kavanagh doubted that Diane would have still been awake at three in the morning, so perhaps she had fallen asleep on the couch. That would explain how her murderer had come in through the garden door unheard, and had been able to walk up behind her. Diane might have been asleep for an hour or more and woken when the ligature tightened around her neck. She had kicked the table

as she fought, bruising her shins, knocking over the cup, spilling cold tea on her leg, the cup rolling onto the floor.

If this were the way it had happened, then it could have been no home invasion. Her killer had gone straight to the couch to strangle her. The stolen computer and television, the tossed drawers, the graffiti that had all been a half-hearted attempt at a cover-up, red herrings to confuse the police.

She was not police any more. She had joined up six weeks after leaving school. For the first time in her adult life she would go to sleep and when she awoke she would not be a police officer. Her future was blank, all certainty gone, but now the urge to cry about that had passed and she felt the burden lift from her chest. No future, but no expectations, and she would never again have to think about duty.

Kavanagh wanted to sleep through the whole day, and when she awoke she would download the crime scene photos she had sent from her phone, and she would go looking for Gareth Ford.

She drank the tea and put the empty cup on the edge of the bath, then lifted her feet out of the water and put them either side of the tap to look at them. They were calloused and blistered, the start of bunions on the instep. The nail on her left big toe had never grown back properly after losing it in a walk across the desert in Marble Bar. They were cop feet, too many hours spent standing in police boots. Maybe she would get a pedicure, see if she could make them presentable enough to wear open shoes for the first time in years. Today all she would do is shave her legs.

Kavanagh slid further down in the bath until her head slipped under the water. She closed her eyes and let the warmth envelope her. She could only hear her own breathing and the blood pumping slowly in her ears. She felt her torso sinking, so she took a deep breath, filling her lungs until her back floated up off the bottom of the bath, and she wondered if this was what freedom felt like.

7.

Kavanagh was woken by her phone, a music ringtone that got slowly louder. It entered her dreams and pulled her slowly into the waking world. She forced open one eye and saw that daylight was still slipping into the room around the edges of the window blind. Stretching out an arm towards the bedside table, her fingers walked across it until they found her phone. They stabbed at the screen until the music stopped and peace returned to the bedroom. She pulled her arm back under the covers and lifted the sheet up over her head.

She lay in a drowsy half world, her mind floating free, but through it all something tugged at her mind. She knew she had not set the alarm on her phone to wake her. There was no night shift to go to. Her intention had been to sleep through the day and the whole of the night.

The ring tone was wrong. It wasn't the one she used for the alarm, but for incoming private calls. She forced herself awake and when she pushed her head out from under the sheet she heard the small voice coming from the phone's earpiece.

'Hello?' it said. 'Hello?'

Kavanagh picked up the phone, craned her neck up off the pillow and squinted at the screen, but couldn't focus on the name through the film of fatigue across her eyes. She hit the loudspeaker button and dropped the phone and let her head fall on the pillow next to it, the cotton cool against her cheek.

'Hello?' the voice said again, sounding more urgent now that the volume was louder.

'Hi there,' said Kavanagh in reply.

'It's me,' he said, expecting her to know his voice as if he had been speaking to her just the day before. She recognized the flat Northern English vowels at once, and the slight gravel rasp in his voice. 'Ford,' she said, 'what time is it?'

'Six,' he said. 'Were you asleep? You sound drowsy.'

'Night shift,' she said. She sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes. 'I tried phoning you yesterday. Your phone was off.'

The line went quiet. She could hear him breathing on the other end. She let him take his time, get to it at his own pace.

'The service was interrupted,' he said eventually.

'You got my message?' she asked.

'Yeah,' he said, and he let the conversation lapse into silence again.

She had wanted to speak to him, but now that she was, she didn't know what to say. She had things she wanted to tell him but no way to say it. The time wasn't right, and she didn't know when it might be better. She knew how much he hated phones, and how distant he could be, even if she was in the same room as him.

'I'm sorry about Diane,' she said. It was the obvious thing to say, but it was all she had. She was surprised that after all that had happened between them it was true: she was truly sorry.

'How did you know?' said Ford.

'I wanted to be the one to tell you,' she said.

'Well, some dumb kid in uniform beat you to it,' he said, and there was anger in his voice.

'They told me they were interviewing you,' said Kavanagh.

He didn't answer, so she let him think, let him form the question in his head and then ask it. She picked up her phone and stood up, let the sheet fall away and walked naked to the window. When she pulled up the blind she saw the sun was behind her



building now, casting a long shadow towards the hills, which were lit up with the yellow light of the fading sun.

Ford said: 'I need your help,' and Kavanagh said softly, 'I know.' She thought she heard him sigh with relief for having got the question out there, and she felt good too that he had.

'Where are you now?' she asked.

'I'm at the house.'

'I'll be there in fifteen minutes,' she said. She cut the connection and looked for where she had left her clothes.

It took her twenty minutes to cross the city on her bike. She followed the river west, into the setting sun, the light scattering off the tops of waves whipped up by a strong sea breeze. She threw her Ducati left and right through the curves along Mounts Bay Road, weaving in and out of the late commuter traffic heading out of the city. She lifted the visor of her helmet so she could feel the breeze on her face, inhaled deeply to catch the salt in the air, and found that she was smiling, enjoying the power of the bike and the freedom of nobody knowing where she was, no sense of duty hanging over her.

As she came around the broad curve approaching the university, she saw the traffic lights ahead. They turned yellow so she flicked her right wrist, feeling her grazed knuckles chafing inside her glove, and the motorcycle surged forward. She reached the lights just as they turned red, stepping down through the gears to make the right turn into Thomas Street and then accelerating up the long straight climb by the park. The street lights came on as she turned left into the grid pattern of residential streets in Shenton Park, and the sky was showing the last purple light of day as she pulled up in front of Ford's house.

An old Chrysler sat in the driveway, a two-door Valiant that Kavanagh guessed at being early seventies vintage. It looked original, the white paintwork aged to a dull

yellow, rust around the wheel arches and the sloping rear window. It sagged low on its suspension and the tyres were bald, but the chrome fenders and hubcaps shone. She hadn't seen the car before, but knew it must be Ford's. She doubted he had bought it as a project for restoration, and probably liked it just the way it was.

She rolled her bike up next to it and cut the engine and kicked down the stand. She took off her helmet and stood for a moment, watching and listening. The house was wrapped in darkness and silence. The only light she could see was from the half-open front door, spilling into the front garden. She walked towards it, her boots thumping on the bare timber boards of the veranda. She stopped at the threshold and called Ford's name.

'I'm in the back room,' he replied, not raising his voice.

Kavanagh walked down the hallway, her helmet swinging in her left hand and her right hand reaching behind her back, feeling the bulge in her leather jacket made by the butt of Chadwick's gun in the waistband of her jeans. She stopped at the end of the corridor and leaned her head into the room and looked for him.

He was on the far side of the living area sitting at the dining table. He had turned around the last chair and sat facing the room, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, staring at the empty space where the couch had been. He turned his eyes briefly to look at Kavanagh, and then lowered them to the whisky glass he held in his hands. It rested lightly between his fingertips, and he turned it slowly, then drank from it. Ford looked at Kavanagh again and this time he stared until she felt uncomfortable. His eyes were sunk deep in darkened sockets, ringed with red and glistening wet.

Kavanagh stepped into the room but stayed by the door, her helmet swinging loose by her side. She looked straight back at him, trying to read the accusation in his eyes and waiting for him to speak. She let the silence in the room build until it was too heavy for her to bear any longer and she had to speak.

'The forensic mob finished up quickly,' she said.

Ford grunted, then cleared his throat before speaking. 'They were packing up when I got home,' he said, then turned around to the table and picked up the bottle of whisky that sat there. With slow, considered movements he pulled the cork and splashed a generous measure into his glass.

'Are you alright?' she asked.

'Fine,' he said, without looking up. He closed his eyes and then opened them again. She could see that he was a long way from fine, whatever that meant to him. He was spinning around somewhere in his mind, not quite in the room with her. She knew she would not be able to leave him. He was stable, not the kind of man to do something stupid. She had seen him in bad situations, but this was different. She'd never seen him shut down so completely.

Kavanagh looked around the room. The couch and the rug had been taken, along with all the electrical cables that had been left trailing along the cupboards. The coffee table stood marooned on the bare floorboards, its top dusted with fingerprint powder. The glass in the patio door was clouded with powder around the handle, as were the kitchen bench tops. She wondered if they had dusted the whole house, but their best chance was at the door, and if they found nothing there they wouldn't find anything anywhere else in the house.

When she looked at Ford again he was staring at the graffiti over the fireplace.

'Can you find out if they got anything?' he said.

Kavanagh shrugged and walked past him and went to the patio door to take a closer look. There were no fingerprints visible in the silver powder, but she didn't expect there to be. She knew that the killer had been a professional and would have worn gloves. She doubted there would be any physical evidence on the body either.

Kavanagh pulled out the chair at the far end of the table and sat down, putting her helmet on the table in front of her and resting her hands on it. Ford was still looking at the graffiti, as if somehow its meaning might be made known to him.

‘Can you read that?’ she asked him. ‘Is it Chinese or Japanese?’

He spoke without turning to her. ‘If it’s linked to Diane, then it’s probably Chinese,’ he said.

‘You think it’s a message?’

‘Makes no sense. It can only be meant for me, and I can’t read it.’

‘Have you had a look around the rest of the house?’ asked Kavanagh. ‘Anything missing that you’ve noticed?’

Ford waved his whisky glass towards the empty cabinet. ‘Her computer went. But not just that. Her back-up drives went as well.’

‘Any chance of retrieving that data?’

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘She backed it up to a cloud, and she had an off-site mail drop where she kept hard-drives with back-ups.’

‘Do you know how to get them?’

‘Yeah. It’s work stuff. Dry geological data. You think someone would kill her for that?’

Kavanagh didn’t dare answer that. Ford had seen enough people killed already because of geological reports, and he knew the answer to his own question.

He stood up and turned his chair back to face the table. When he sat down and looked at her she could see the tracks of his tears down his cheeks. He looked thinner than the last time she had seen him. He had cropped his hair short, the salt and pepper over his ears merging into the greying stubble on his cheeks, which seemed hollow, picking out his sharp cheek bones. He wore a denim shirt that hung off him, bought at

a time before he'd shed the weight. He reached for the whisky bottle and she saw that the writing on the label was in red calligraphy.

'More Chinese writing?' she said.

He shook his head. 'Japanese,' he said. 'It was lurking at the back of the pantry. Diane threw out every other bottle of liquor. She missed this one. Perhaps the label fooled her. Maybe she thought it was fish sauce or something.' He pulled the cork and refreshed his drink.

'Whisky doesn't solve anything,' said Kavanagh.

'Do you have a drink that does?' said Ford. When she shook her head he took a long swig out of the glass and said, 'I need a drink more than I need sympathy.'

'Where's Grace?' asked Kavanagh.

Ford looked down into the glass, as if grateful to have something to look at and touch and turn thoughtfully. 'She's with Diane's parents. They live up in the hills. She's spending the weekend there. It was supposed to give Diane and me some space.'

'But you weren't with Diane tonight.'

'She wanted to use the time to talk. It was a bad idea. Not much talking. Some shouting.'

'What about?'

'Does it matter now?' said Ford. He sat stock still and looked right through Kavanagh, as if listening to other voices on a different frequency.

'It matters to the police,' said Kavanagh. 'It might give you motive.'

His eyes focused on her now. 'It was about her kicking me out.'

'So where were you when uniform picked you up?'

'At the casino,' he said.

Kavanagh raised an eyebrow at him but he didn't respond. It was the most natural thing in the world to him. 'How long were you in questioning?' she asked.

Ford sighed and drained his glass. 'They left me stewing in an interview room for a few hours while they checked the security cameras at the casino. That told them how long I'd been at the table, and after that they had nothing much to ask me.'

'Why did you go there?'

Ford shrugged. 'Where else can you go at midnight in this town?'

'Your marriage fell apart so you went gambling?'

'I wasn't gambling,' he said. 'I was playing poker.'

'I thought you played the horses?'

'Nothing running at that hour,' he said.

He lifted the bottle and offered it to her. She nodded and got up, walking into the kitchen to find a glass. 'So poker was something to take your mind off the fight?'

She opened the nearest overhead cupboard and found the glassware. She took down a tumbler and then opened the fridge looking for ice.

'There's no better place than the casino when you want to be alone,' said Ford. 'Regardless of how crowded it is, I feel utterly alone there. I get the same feeling in airports and hotel lobbies. You could be anywhere in the world in those places, always the same, no character. No natural light, everyone just passing through. They work around the clock, a strange sort of limbo, some empty place between dreams and reality. I always imagine that purgatory is some place like that.'

Kavanagh found the ice and filled her glass, then walked over and put her glass down on the table next to his. 'And the bar is always open there,' she said.

He smiled at this. Nothing big, just the slightest turn to his lips. She liked the way his eyes narrowed and the creases around them deepened.

'Yeah, I wanted to drink,' he said. 'The pubs in the city were shut and the casino is open twenty-four seven. If you just sit there soaking at the bar they throw you out, but if you're at a table they let you stay. They think you'll lose more.'

He filled his glass and started pouring whisky into Kavanagh's. She waved for him to stop before the ice started to float. 'It seems an expensive way to drink,' she said.

Not really, I usually win. At least enough to pay for what I drink.'

She picked up the glass and sipped at it. 'I thought you were on the wagon?'

Ford looked down at his glass and the light bounced off the surface of the whisky and danced across his face. 'Why would you think that?' he said.

'You were trying to save your marriage. Drinking wouldn't help.'

'I'd been dry for the last three months,' said Ford. 'Sober, without the crutch of cigarettes. It wasn't a waste of time but it wasn't much fun either. I tried and I failed.'

'Drinking or marriage?' asked Kavanagh.

'Either,' he said. 'Or both. Take your pick.'

She saw the loss in his eyes and she wanted to hold him, but didn't know if that would be for his benefit or hers, and whether it would do either of them any good, so she said, 'Are you hungry? I haven't eaten since I got off the night shift.'

Ford said nothing, but put his glass to his lips.

'You should eat,' she said, and went back to the fridge. She opened it and saw that it was well stocked. 'Where did you go after they released you?' she said, taking out eggs, milk, butter and sliced ham and wondering where the bread was kept.

'I asked to see Diane,' said Ford. 'They needed someone to formally identify the body, so they let me do it.'

'You went straight to the morgue?'

Ford nodded and took a slug from his glass. He rolled the whisky around his mouth and swallowed, and was lost in thought for a moment before he said, 'I looked at her then I looked away. It was strange. It didn't surprise me at all. Almost like it had only been a matter of time until one of us was on a slab and the other was standing over.'

Kavanagh found a dishcloth in the sink and wiped the fingerprint powder off the bench, then laid out the food. 'I saw her,' she said. 'I was here in the house earlier.'

He looked up now, confusion in his eyes. He opened his mouth to frame a question but she cut him off. 'I heard the call on the radio, recognised this address. I was worried.'

'About me?'

'I've had the same feeling, that one day I'd be standing over your body.'

He looked at her properly now, and for a moment she saw the barriers fall away from behind his eyes and she saw the man she knew.

'Let's have a drink to celebrate my resurrection,' he said. He emptied his glass and when he looked at her again the barricades were back up.

She opened the cupboards under the bench until she found a bowl and broke the eggs into it. She found a whisk hanging above the sink and started to beat the eggs.

'You're making breakfast?' he asked.

'I only just got out of bed,' said Kavanagh. 'When did you last eat?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I lost track of time.'

She poured milk into the eggs and finished beating them, then tore up the ham into small pieces. 'You asked me here because you need my help.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'But not to cook for me.'

'I started asking questions and knocking a few heads together,' said Kavanagh.

He shook his head. 'That's not what I meant,' he said. 'I want them to release her body to me. I don't want Grace to see her in the morgue. I want to get her dressed properly, make her look like she's sleeping, so that Grace can see the mother she knows. Can you talk to them, get them to give her back to us?'



Kavanagh took down a skillet from a shelf next to the stove and turned on the gas. She put butter in the pan and while she waited for it to melt she thought about what to say to him.

‘I can’t do that,’ she said.

Ford’s eyes narrowed. ‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘It’s not like that,’ she said. ‘I resigned. I quit the force. Straight after I left here.’

‘Why would you do that? I need you now.’

‘And I’m here. Just not in uniform.’

‘Why would you be in uniform?’ asked Ford.

The butter had melted now and she watched it bubble. ‘It’s been a while since we last spoke. We have some catching up to do.’

‘Is that why you quit? They put you back in uniform?’

‘That was part of it, but there’s something else going on.’ She poured the eggs into the pan and spotted a bread bin at the end of the bench. There was a sliced loaf inside it and she slotted two rounds into the toaster. ‘I got called in front of the Inspector, some disciplinary bullshit, the same stuff they’ve been pulling on me all year. They were trying to scare me off. Chadwick was at the station, and he’s got something to do with this.’

Ford said nothing. He turned and stared at the Chinese graffiti over the fireplace, trying to piece it together.

The eggs began to curdle so Kavanagh took the pan off the heat and began to stir them. ‘When is Grace coming home?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ford, leaving his back to her. ‘I went to see her when I left the morgue. I had to tell her that her mother was gone. Diane’s parents wouldn’t let me stay too long. They were angry.’

‘They blame you?’

‘For everything and anything. They’re threatening to fight me for custody of Grace. I thought they needed some time. Maybe they’ll come around. I told them what I know and left Grace there until I can get the house in order and her mother home.’

‘And what do you know?’

‘I told them it was a home invasion gone wrong, that the police were looking at Asian street gangs.’

‘You can’t believe that?’

‘No, I think it’s all still fallout from McCann and Marble Bar, but I couldn’t tell them that, they would have turned it back on me. Even if it’s indirect, they still think it’s karma because she married me.’

‘We’ll sort this out,’ said Kavanagh, and when she heard the words out of her own mouth she recognised their futility. ‘Maybe Grace is better where she is until we’ve cleared this up.’

‘She is all I have left,’ said Ford.

‘You’ve got me,’ said Kavanagh, and she waited to hear what he would say about that.

He turned slowly and watched her stirring the eggs. ‘I don’t think I’m hungry,’ he said.

The toast popped. Kavanagh buttered it and found a couple of plates for them. She stirred the ham through the eggs and spooned them onto the toast. The top draw held cutlery, and once she had it all together she carried the plates to the table. She put a plate in front of Ford and then sat down at the opposite end of the table.

She loaded her fork and took a mouthful, but when she looked up he was staring at his plate.

‘You should eat,’ she said. ‘We have work to do.’

He picked up his fork and prodded at the eggs, then let the fork drop. It clattered off the side of the plate and skidded across the table.

‘So why did you come here?’ Ford asked. ‘Did you come here for me, or have you got your own reasons?’

‘I’m just doing my job.’

Ford picked up his fork and scooped up some eggs. He lifted it to his mouth and sniffed at it, then wrinkled his nose and laid the fork back down. ‘It’s not your job any more,’ he said. ‘You quit.’

Kavanagh piled the toast with egg and filled her mouth, shaking her head as she chewed. ‘We call it the job, because it is more than that. It’s a vocation, a life choice. The badge is just a means to enable us to do the job.’

‘And what is that?’

‘Justice,’ she said, still chewing.

Ford lifted his fork again and this time he ate. They watched each other chewing, waiting for the other to speak.

‘Justice is the job of the courts,’ said Ford. ‘Cops are there to catch the crooks. You don’t pass judgement.’

‘That was always the drawback of being a public servant,’ said Kavanagh. ‘Maybe I’ll have more freedom on my own.’

‘You’re a vigilante now?’

‘That’s not a word I’d use.’

‘So who are you going after?’

‘McCann and Roth.’

‘So this is about you, after all.’

‘It’s about both of us,’ she said. ‘We’ve both come out of this as losers since this whole thing began.’

'I think Diane is the one that's paid the highest price here.'

Kavanagh shovelled the last of her eggs into her mouth, dropped her cutlery on the plate and pushed it away. 'You can go and get your daughter, or you can leave her where she is and come with me and finish this.'

Ford finished chewing, looked at his full plate and pushed it away, then turned to look at the graffiti on the wall, as if it were some arcane symbol on which to meditate. Kavanagh wrapped her knuckles on the table to bring him back.

'And if you're coming with me, then I need you whole,' she said. 'Not looking back all the time.'

He stood up and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. 'I've only got one direction left to go,' he said. 'What did those bikies used to say? Ride fast and straight at them.'

**8.**

Ford stepped out onto the veranda and was admiring Kavanagh's Ducati when she came out and joined him. She had her phone to her ear and when Ford started to speak she flared her eyes at him and put a finger to her lips.

She looked older than the last time he had seen her, or maybe the lines around her eyes were just tiredness. The creases looked good on her. She had the sort of face that grew better with age, handsome rather than pretty. She was busy on the phone, not saying much but listening intently, saying yes every so often. Her eyes were looking up at the flies dancing around the single light hanging from the roof, and Ford stepped back into the shadows so he could look at her without her knowing. She wore jeans and a tee-shirt, and her red leather jacket over the top, the same outfit she always wore, and it struck him that he had never given any thought to whether she ever wore anything else. Her bleached white hair was cut short and was messy from being under her helmet. She wore no makeup and he liked how she could get up and go like that and still look good.

He'd spent hours in the police station thinking what he would say to her if he saw her, but now his anger had switched, no longer directed at her but out into the night, unfocused and without a target. He knew now that he'd asked for her help because he'd wanted to see her and that he'd held his anger out as a shield in front of himself, so that he did not have to admit he had been thinking about her more than his wife.

She was making another call now, tapping anxiously at the screen of her phone, her forehead compressed in frustration. He could hear it ringing out. She cancelled the call and was still staring at the screen when he asked who she was calling.

She looked one more time at the screen, then put the phone in her jacket pocket.

‘Alannah Doyle,’ she said. ‘If Chadwick is snooping around this then Alan McCann is involved somehow. Alannah’s been chasing the story about McCann. I figured we should talk to her first.’

Ford had only met Doyle once, when she was still working as a journalist on the Goldfields Courier. He had spent an evening sat at her kitchen table with Kavanagh picking shotgun pellets out of his thigh with a pair of tweezers. He read her work now in the Perth Gazette, a step up following her coverage of the Gwardar robbery.

‘What did she say?’ asked Ford

Kavanagh stepped over to the railing and looked out over the dark garden, thinking before she said, ‘I called the Gazette. Alannah was supposed to be working today but didn’t show up and didn’t call in. That’s not like her.’

Ford formed a mental picture of Doyle: a small woman, good looking but she hid it behind a serious haircut and thick glasses, taking care to project an image of gravitas and an attitude that told you not to disagree with her. She wasn’t the sort of woman to tolerate tardiness.

Kavanagh looked at her watch. ‘I tried her home number and her mobile, and both went to voicemail.

‘Where does she live?’ asked Ford.

‘Mount Lawley.’

‘We can be there in ten minutes, said Ford, jangling his keys.

Kavanagh looked across at the old Valiant. ‘You don’t mind being seen in that?’

‘I wouldn’t want to be seen in anything else,’ said Ford.

He swung the keys around the tip of his finger and she snatched them off him. ‘You’ve had too many,’ she said. ‘We’ll go on my bike. You’ll need a helmet.’

Ford stepped inside the front door and took his scooter helmet off the coat rack in the hallway. He put it on, an old open-face half-shell with a peak on the front and a

target painted on the side. When he stepped outside Kavanagh saw him and smiled. 'You still got that old Vespa?' she asked, and put her sleeve across her mouth to hide her grin. Ford could see the smile in her eyes and he liked it, glad that they were starting to fall back into a routine they both knew. He reached inside the door to turn out the lights, then closed and locked the front door. There were times the house had felt like a home to him, and times it had felt hostile and alien. Now he wasn't sure how he felt about it, but he still thought of it as Diane's house, and couldn't imagine a time when he might return to it.

Kavanagh was already astride the Ducati and pulling on her helmet. Ford climbed on behind her and put his hands lightly on her hips, lifting his knees up high to find the foot pegs.

Kavanagh hit the starter button and the headlights flooded the dark street. She pulled away slowly, the engine at a low purr, and as they crawled along the street Ford looked over his shoulder at the house receding into the darkness.

Kavanagh didn't turn once to speak to him during the short trip. He couldn't see the speedo but it felt like she was racing, weaving in and out of the early evening traffic, twice running through lights on yellow. He tucked himself as low as he could and put his head down to keep the wind out of his face, letting his hands move with Kavanagh's hips as she shifted her weight on the bike through the turns.

When he felt the bike slowing he looked up as Kavanagh pulled into the driveway of a small block of flats, a three-storey red brick building, bow-fronted where it met the street corner, the balconies curving with the façade and edged with Art Deco details.

Ford stepped off the bike as soon as Kavanagh had put the stand down. She swung her leg over and went running up the concrete staircase without taking her helmet off. Ford didn't catch up with her until she was on the landing of the top floor, both of them out of breath, Kavanagh fumbling with her keys trying to force one into the lock.

'She gave you a key?' Ford asked, panting.

Kavanagh flipped the visor of her helmet and muttered something that was too muffled for him to make out, then the key pushed home and the door opened. Kavanagh flung it open and she was through it at a run. The apartment inside was dark and silent apart from their laboured breathing. Ford watched Kavanagh flicking the lights on, pushing open doors as she went down the corridor and checking each room in turn, her movements becoming more frantic as she got to the living room at the end of the passage.

When Ford got there she was standing on the rug in the middle of the room, turning slowly, checking everything even as she pulled off her helmet.

The room was crowded with furniture, as if Doyle's belongings had come from a larger house and she hadn't wanted to part with any of it. The room was cold and smelled damp, and Ford saw the open door to the balcony. A wide high curved window ran around one corner of the room, hung with lace curtains that billowed in the draught from the door. Along the opposite wall was a low brick fireplace with an old gas heater, and above it the bare wall had been sprayed with a large Chinese character in red aerosol paint, the strokes looser this time with runs and streaks that had dripped onto the mantelpiece.

Ford saw it first and stepped over to the fireplace and put his fingers to the wall to test whether the shiny paint was still wet. His fingers came away clean and he showed them to Kavanagh. 'Are these the same characters?'

She took out her phone and the screen lit up her face. She turned it towards Ford to show him the photo of the graffiti at his house. Ford looked from the phone to the wall and back again before he nodded. 'Who do we know that can read Chinese?'

'The forensics people will have translated it.'

'So call them.'



'I'll try,' said Kavanagh, 'but I don't know whether any of my friends there will talk. We need other options.'

'Maybe someone at the newspaper?' said Ford.

Kavanagh shrugged. She sat down on the couch and rocked backwards, bringing her legs up close to her body and hugging them. Her lips resting on her knees, her eyes staring straight ahead and filling with tears.

Ford didn't know what to say to her, so wandered to the far side of the room and started looking around the room. Apart from the couch, there was a small four-seater dining table, a coffee table and a row of bookcases next to the fireplace. In the middle of the shelving was a free-standing cupboard, an elegant Deco with inlaid wood on the face. Ford noticed a small keyhole on the front panel and recognized it as a drop-down writing desk. He turned the old brass key in the lock and the whole front of it swung downwards until it lay flat, exposing a writing surface inlaid with green leather.

The back of the desk was fitted with shelves stacked with books and a pair of wires snaked out from the shelves and across the leather. He knew that one was a computer power cord, the other a blue Ethernet cable. He pulled at them and found where they disappeared through a hole in the back panel and went down to a socket in the wall.

'Did Doyle carry her laptop around with her?' he asked.

'Always,' said Kavanagh, still hugging her knees, rocking slowly on the couch. 'If she's missing, so is her computer.'

'You think she's missing?'

'She's the only friend I've got who's not a cop,' she said.

'I never met any of your cop friends,' said Ford.

'You won't, not now,' she said. 'You stay in the force long enough they teach you not to trust everyone who's not in the job. You start thinking the world wants to kick the shit out of you.'

She uncurled herself, stood up and joined him at the desk, wiping her eyes on the back of her sleeve. Ford looked at the fear in her eyes and wondered what he had looked like when she'd first seen him that evening, sitting in his living room drinking alone.

Kavanagh picked up the stack of books from the desk and started looking at the covers. 'Five years I've known Alannah,' she said. 'All that time, she's never been anywhere the newspaper can't find her. She's never turned her phone off, never let the battery run down, never gone more than fifteen minutes without checking her messages and email.' She flicked through the first couple of books and put them back on the desk. The third book held her attention.

'She would drive me crazy,' she said. 'Her computer was always on. She couldn't walk past it without checking the internet for breaking news. She'd get up to make a drink and ten minutes later I'd find her making notes from some news site.' She had the book open now, and was looking at post-it notes stuck in the margins to mark pages. 'She's missing, and I need to know who that graffiti message is for.'

She closed the book, put it flat on the desk and laid a finger on the title. 'Does this mean anything to you?' she said. 'I can't even pronounce this.'

Ford looked down at the book. The title read: *Przewalski's Horse: The History and Biology of an Endangered Species*, and the cover showed a small brown horse with a thick neck, its black mane sticking up like a yard broom. Ford shrugged and opened the cover, reading aloud from the first page. 'Przewalski's Horse, also known as the Mongolian Wild Horse, or Takhi, is considered to be the only truly wild horse left in the wild, and the closest living relative to the domesticated horse.'

He looked at Kavanagh and shrugged. She'd wiped the tears from her eyes and gone some way to rebuilding her face into an expression of defiance.

'You're the horse rider in this partnership,' said Ford. 'I only bet on them, and this stubby Mongoloid mongrel doesn't look like it can run too fast. I'm not sure you could even ride it without your boots dragging in the dirt.'

She almost smiled at this, her eyes creasing a little, but it was enough for him.

'Alannah hates horses,' she said. 'I offered to take her riding once. She wouldn't go near it. She came on my Ducati one time, said she could deal with the bike because it didn't have a mind of its own. You could turn it off when you got bored of it. I don't know what she's doing with this book.'

Ford was leafing through the pages, looking at the ones marked. There were words underlined in pencil, some in ink, or highlighted in yellow. They seemed random. There were numbers jotted in the margins, and indentations where some had been erased. No sentences were marked, only single words. He looked at the inside of the back cover and there were columns of numbers there and the occasional word in pencil.

'It's a book code,' he said.

He held the book open so she could see, and she leaned in to him, the first time they had touched in six months. He could smell her perfume and the leather of her jacket which gave off a whiff of petrol. He tried to focus on the book.

He showed her the pairs of numbers written on the inside cover, each pair separated by a full stop.

'The first number is the page, the second is the word on that page. It's impossible to break the code unless you have the book. It seems very old school when encryption software is available.'

'What do the messages say?' asked Kavanagh, stooping to squint at the numbers.

'No idea. There's no complete message here, just fragments. She's rubbed some of them out, written over others, crossed bits out. I'd guess the messages were swapped over the internet.'

‘So who’s sending her messages?’ asked Kavanagh. ‘Was she talking to Diane?’

‘She didn’t know her. There’s no link between them.’

‘Except that message on the wall,’ said Kavanagh. She had turned to look at the graffiti, biting her lip. ‘Something’s going on. I’m looking at it, but I don’t know what it is.’ Ford watched her, thinking that he had once bitten those lips, a long time ago now, but he could still remember how they tasted.

‘Diane wouldn’t use anything as daft as a book code. She was tech savvy. She had her own encryption software. She had protected drop boxes and file transfer protocols. She was sending big files full of geological data across the world. She’d think this book thing was a joke. There’s someone else involved here.’

‘Two groups,’ said Kavanagh, her eyes wide now. ‘Somebody was communicating secretly with Alannah and Diane, and someone else is trying to find that person. They took computers from Diane’s house, and may have Alannah and her computer. Maybe that’s what this graffiti is, a calling card from the one looking.’ She had her phone in her hand now, her thumb flicking through numbers, then she put it to her ear.

‘Who are you calling?’ asked Ford.

‘My partner,’ she said, before frowning and correcting herself. ‘Former partner.’

Ford went and sat on the sofa and watched her, her back to him. ‘Hackett?’ she said into the phone. ‘Yeah, less than a day. I can’t keep away.’ She stood listening, turning slowly to face Ford, and then she laughed at whatever was said, but her face didn’t change, her expression neutral. ‘Listen now,’ she said. ‘You remember Alannah Doyle? She was with me that time at the Court Wine Bar? Drank you under the table?’ She laughed again. ‘That’s her. I’m at her apartment. It’s been broken into. Same story as the Ford house in Shenton Park. I need you to log her as a missing person and get a forensics team out here. Why? Because I’m asking you. You can consider it a favour if you like. A deposit at the bank. You can make a withdrawal some other time.’ She

looked down at Ford and rolled her eyes, throwing out her hip and resting her free hand on it.

‘Has anyone translated the graffiti on the wall at Shenton Park?’ she asked, and then scowled when she heard the answer. ‘They’ve only told the detectives? Above your pay grade huh?’

‘One more thing,’ she said into the phone. ‘I need you to get her phone and internet records.’ She laughed again. ‘You’re right. I’m asking, not telling. Pretty please, pretty boy. No, I won’t be here when you get here.’

She killed the phone and looked at Ford, impatience showing in her face.

‘Where will you be?’ asked Ford.

‘We’re going to the newspaper, see if they have a back-up of what’s on her computer.’

9.

Kavanagh pointed the Ducati west, through the suburbs and under the freeway and out into a grid pattern of wide streets flanked by featureless warehouses and faceless low-rise office blocks. The streets were empty and the buildings were dark and quiet, the roar of the motorcycle echoing off the bare concrete walls of the warehouses.

The newspaper's office sat on a broad block, surrounded by lawn and car park, and stood out from the rest of the buildings by its attempt at architectural flair. Three storeys of white concrete and glass, a regimented line of pencil pines planted along the front ending in a flagpole, an attempt to project some pride in the newspaper after having to move from its imposing stone building in the city to this anonymous light-industrial limbo. The newspaper was the only building with cars at the front and lights in the windows, although only the top floor was lit.

Kavanagh swept across the car park in a broad curve and pulled up on the pavement outside the main entrance, a wide expanse of foyer visible through the plate glass with a small reception desk marooned in front of a backlit sign showing the newspaper's masthead. A lone security guard sat at the desk watching them dismount.

Ford followed Kavanagh to the automatic door and they stood waiting for it to open. They waved at the motion sensor and then they waved at the guard. He was an old man, past retirement age, his grey hair buzz cut into a flat top and paired with a thick moustache that drooped either side of his mouth. The way he sat upright in his chair suggested a past career in the military. He watched them for a moment and then mimed taking off a helmet. They did as they were told and then smiled at the camera over the door and then at the guard and the door slid open. The guard watched them walk across the foyer, their boots ringing in the concrete floor. When they reached his desk he opened his mouth to speak but Kavanagh raised her hand to stop him. She held

her phone, and she laid it on the desk in front of him and pressed the screen. The speaker was on and Ford could hear it ringing.

‘Hello?’ said a woman’s voice.

‘Who am I speaking to?’ asked Kavanagh.

‘Nicole,’ the voice said, sounding busy and uninterested.

‘Hi Nicole, this is Rose Kavanagh, we spoke earlier. I rang this number looking for Alannah Doyle.’

There was silence for a moment, then, ‘She’s still not called in.’

‘Can I speak to the night desk?’

‘The editor is still here if you want to speak to him,’ said Nicole. ‘I’ll put you through.’

Kavanagh smiled at the guard as the phone rang again.

‘Sean Langley,’ said a weary man’s voice.

‘Sean, my name is Rose Kavanagh. I’m a friend of Alannah Doyle. I wondered if we could talk.’

‘Go ahead, but I haven’t got long, we’re trying to put the paper to bed.’

‘No, I mean in person. I’m downstairs at the front desk, with the security guard. You’re on speaker.’

There was a small ripple of laughter from the other end, ‘You there, Bob?’ asked Langley.

‘Yup,’ said the guard. There was a look of amusement in his eyes, but otherwise his face stayed rigid.

‘Could you send them up, please?’ said Langley.

Kavanagh cut off the call and waited for the guard to speak.

‘Take the lift over there,’ he said, polite now. ‘Level three, then down to the far end of the floor. Not many people still working. You’ll see him.’

In the lift Ford waited for Kavanagh to speak but she was watching the lights above the door, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, swapping her helmet from hand to hand. He could hear her breathing, the only sound in the lift until the doors chimed and opened.

She stepped out ahead of him, looking around quickly to get her bearings and then setting off with long strides towards the far end of the floor. The building was open plan, a grid pattern of desks that matched the geometry of the streets outside, each workstation separated by low felt partitions. The floor seemed empty and silent apart from a distant ringing phone, but as Ford followed Kavanagh down the aisle between the desks, occasionally a journalist would pop their head above the partition to watch them pass. Across the end of the floor was a row of offices, plate glass boxes like fish tanks. Only the end office was lit, and from inside it a slender silver-haired man in a creased business shirt and a loosely twisted tie was watching them approach. He let them step inside his office before he stood up and spoke.

‘Detective Constable Kavanagh,’ he said, extending his hand towards her. ‘Sean Langley. We never met, but I know your name of course, from Alannah’s coverage of the Gwardar Robbery.’

Kavanagh hesitated for a second, then shook his hand and introduced Ford. This time it was Langley’s turn to hesitate. Ford watched the editor give him the once-over, from hair to boots. He felt scruffy, but then noticed the sweat stains under the arms of Langley’s shirt, and the red rings around his eyes, and wondered how long he had been working.

‘I thought the paper would have been printed by now,’ said Ford.

Langley forced a smile. ‘The country edition has gone, but we’ve still got some changes to make before we print the Metro edition.’



'You remember my name too?' asked Ford, holding out his hand to shake, 'I was the headline.'

'Only once on the front page,' said Langley, recovering his charm and taking Ford's hand. 'No case to answer, as I recall.'

Langley sat down and waved for them to sit, but Kavanagh stayed on her feet, so Ford did too, standing a pace behind her left shoulder, letting her lead.

'I'm worried about Alannah,' she said. 'I've reported her to the police as missing.'

Langley frowned at this, waiting for her to explain.

'Ford's wife was murdered last night, and we've got reason to suspect that her death is connected to Alannah's disappearance.'

Langley's frown deepened and he looked at Ford. 'My deepest sympathy,' he said, leaning on his desk, lacing his fingers together, his thumbs twitching. 'How can I help?'

'How close was Alannah getting to Alan McCann?' said Kavanagh.

Langley leaned back on his chair, a wide leather executive model, and as he pushed back into it the leather and the spring mechanism sighed. He put his hands behind his head, his fingers still interlocked, the stains under his arms on show. He looked from Kavanagh to Ford, thinking, then let out a slow breath and said, 'She had a lot on him, but nothing that I was prepared to print.'

'Why not?' said Kavanagh.

'Because it was a few bits of hard fact bound together with a lot of conjecture and hearsay. You don't have a tilt at someone like McCann unless your story is watertight.'

'You're scared of his lawyers?'

'The owner of this newspaper is,' said Langley. 'Me? I'm just disgusted at how far respectable and apparently honest lawyers will go in representing the interests of clients they must know are behaving unethically and perhaps illegally.'

'Did you know McCann was back in the country?'

Langley nodded slowly. 'Alannah was trying to arrange an interview, but he's cloistered himself in that hotel and will only speak through his lawyers.'

'Have the police or the Securities Commission tried to interview him?'

'Not since he came into the country. There was talk of issuing a warrant on him for failing his duties as a company director after he put his company into receivership, but it was lightweight stuff and McCann's lawyers kept stalling it with bullshit motions. Now McCann has turned that on its head. He's got his creditors eating out of his hand, promising them he's going to re-float his company with Chinese money and repay them in full. Now the creditors are leaning on the Securities Commission to back off, even putting pressure on the government to waive foreign ownership rules so the Chinese can take a piece of his company.'

'But what about the assets he stripped from the business?' asked Ford.

'Alannah is the only one chasing those,' said Langley. 'She's got nowhere. The receivers spent a year following the money but gave up. In these days of electronic transfers McCann could move the money around the world in twenty-four hours. It would take the receivers months to get the foreign court orders they needed to get the banks to open their doors to them, but by then the money would have moved again. Alannah found that McCann had put most of the hard assets into his daughter's name: his houses, his art collection, his vineyard, that big boat. The cash was hidden where nobody could find it. His business just owns his shares and his mining assets, and what was left of his property development business, and that's all worthless until he re-floats.'

'All this that you're telling us,' said Kavanagh, 'this is from Alannah's investigation?'

Langley nodded. 'It was taking up too much of her time. I told her to give up and move on, like the receivers did, but you know her, she won't be told. You think McCann is behind her disappearance?'

‘Who else?’ said Kavanagh. ‘Although he’s smart enough not to get involved. He has a fixer, a South African called Roth. He was the mercenary that set up the Gwardar Robbery and framed the bikies for it.’

‘He skipped bail and left the country,’ said Langley.

‘We’ve seen him in Australia since then. He was in Marble Bar last year. He has several identities. All this is just his style.’

Langley shrugged. ‘He hasn’t shown up on our radar. We haven’t even been able to get a photo of McCann. He’s in the Penglai Island Hotel, a guest of the Lau family, and he hasn’t left the hotel yet. The whole top four floors of that place are sealed off. We don’t know what they do up there, but we think that William Lau himself is here, and has brought his wife and several of his children, so something is going on.’

Kavanagh thought for a moment and then leaned closer to the desk, resting her hands on the back of the chair facing Langley, hunching her shoulders. ‘Diane Ford’s computer was stolen. Alannah’s laptop is missing too. Perhaps she still has it with her and so we reckon there’s something on it, and somebody wants it. Does she back up her laptop to the newspaper’s server?’

‘It happens automatically any time she plugs it in here,’ said Langley, his voice hesitant. ‘You’d need a warrant to look at that. As a matter of policy we don’t let the police look at my journalists’ sources.’

Kavanagh sat down now, put her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on her knuckles, looking straight at Langley. ‘I’m not the police any more. I quit.’

Langley looked over Kavanagh’s shoulder at Ford, who was leaning against the door frame. Ford nodded slowly. Langley leaned back further in his chair, the back tilting away from Kavanagh, the springs squeaking. ‘So why are you throwing your weight around?’

Kavanagh took a deep breath. Ford could see her clenching her fist, her knuckles turning white under her chin, but she forced a smile and he liked the way she kept it together.

‘The police will be here eventually,’ she said. ‘With a warrant no doubt, and you can play the indignant man of principle for them. You know that McCann has friends in the police. Anything the cops discover will make its way to him. Our best chance of finding Alannah is to get into her computer before they do.’

Langley sat upright and let the springs in the chair push him forward until he was leaning his elbows on the desk, his face close to Kavanagh’s. He stared at her for a full minute and Kavanagh seemed happy to wait. Eventually he said, ‘Alannah once told me you were the only police she could trust. She went out of her way to keep you out of the stories she wrote about McCann.’ He picked up the phone from his desk and punched a number. ‘Nicole,’ he said into the mouthpiece. ‘Could you join us in my office?’

Ford turned and looked through the open door, waiting to see who might appear from behind their felt partition. A young woman stood up from the second desk from the door. She was slender and petite, some way from reaching thirty, dressed in a plain blue trouser suit and a white blouse with the top button fastened. Her straight black hair touched her shoulders and was cut in a fringe just above her eyes, which were hidden behind frameless glasses that glinted with reflections from the overhead strip lighting. She walked down the aisle with her head bowed, looking down at the floor, making small neat footsteps towards him. She didn’t look up until she had to step past him through the door, and when she raised her chin he saw that the eyes behind the glasses were Chinese and they looked at him intently before she turned to offer her hand to Kavanagh.

‘Nicole Huang,’ she said. ‘We’ve spoken on the phone.’ Kavanagh took her hand lightly and smiled. Ford offered his hand and Huang looked at it then at his face.

'You're Gareth Ford,' she said, and put her hand in his. Her hand was tiny and she exerted no pressure in the grip, her eyes studying him with some amusement. 'I've seen your photo in the paper,' she said.

'Nicole has the desk next to Alannah's,' said Langley. 'She's probably best placed to help you. She'll get you access to Alannah's computer.'

Nicole turned to him, her eyebrow raised. 'It's all right,' said Langley, 'they can look at whatever they want. If you could look after them, I've got to put this newspaper to bed.'

Nicole nodded so deeply it was almost a bow. She looked at Ford and Kavanagh with a silent expression that said they were to follow her, then turned on her heels and stepped through the door. She went only as far as the first cubicle outside Langley's office. The L-shaped desk filled the small workspace between the partitions with only enough room behind the office chair to allow Huang to stand. Ford and Kavanagh stood in the aisle, looking at the papers stacked on Doyle's desk. Huang leaned over the chair and turned on the computer. When the screen came to life she typed in a password.

'Are you logging in as yourself or Alannah?' asked Ford.

'I know her password,' said Huang. 'Occasionally she'd be out on a story and want something off her computer, and I'd get it for her.'

Kavanagh looked confused. 'Did you work on stories together?'

'Sometimes, but she had her own work too.'

'Did she ever share any information about Alan McCann?'

'She would talk about him, mostly what a slippery bastard he was, how she would get close and he would slip away.' The screen was alive now, showing the newspaper masthead and a page of icons.

'Can we see her email?' asked Ford.

Huang sat down at the desk and her fingers danced over the keys. She opened up the email inbox and scrolled through the last few days' mail. 'Are we looking for anything in particular?'

'You'd know better than us. Anything unusual, any contacts or addresses you don't recognise.'

'Everything here is unusual. That's the nature of journalism, you never know what's going to happen or who's going to throw you a story.'

'Then is there anything there related to McCann?'

Huang snorted. 'Half of this stuff is about him. She had become a bit obsessed. Kept telling me there was a Walkley in it for her.'

'How close was she?'

'I don't know. She started getting secretive, stopped sharing. Let me know she had a new contact. A bit smug about it, how she'd got this source who was going to finally get her what she needed.'

'Anything in the email about this source?'

'Nothing obvious, it would take a while to go through it all,' said Huang, her eyes darting from side to side as the lines of email scrolled past. 'I don't think she would leave anything sensitive in her work email.'

'Is there anything in code?' said Ford. 'Pairs of numbers, separated by a full stop?'

Huang looked at Ford, and when she decided he was serious she turned back to the screen. She typed some number into the search box but then shook her head. 'Computer says no. This is all pretty mundane stuff on here.'

'Let's take a look at her browsing history,' said Ford.

Huang sighed and opened the web browser then called up the history. Ford stepped around her chair, squeezing himself into the cubicle, his hand on the back of the chair, leaning across Huang to get a better look at the small text in the screen. Ford's eyes

flicked side to side in unison with Huang's until he jabbed a finger at the screen and said: 'Stop!'

Huang watched the screen wobbling and looked at the big fingerprint left by Ford, and she sighed again, leaning back and trying to scoot the chair sideways away from Ford.

Ford pointed again. 'There's a group of sites here in Chinese. Can Alannah read Chinese?'

'Fuck no,' said Kavanagh.

'I can,' said Huang.

'Did she ever ask you to translate anything for her?'

'Never. I didn't know she was looking at this stuff.'

Now Kavanagh stepped forward, half into the cubicle, boxing in Huang from her right side until all three of them were packed into the tiny workspace, their heads level, staring at the screen.

'What are these sites?' asked Kavanagh.

'Mostly Chinese news sites: Sina Weibo, Baidu Baike. There are a few sites for Chinese bloggers, some sort of wildlife preservation charity and some environmental site. This one here is for the Wang Songlian, the Chinese Human Rights Network.'

Kavanagh pulled her hand out of her pocket with her phone, and held the screen up so Huang could see it. It showed the graffiti from Doyle's apartment. 'Can you read this?'

Huang grabbed Kavanagh's wrist, holding the phone steady. 'I don't know,' she said. 'It's small on that screen.' Kavanagh enlarged the image, zooming in on the Chinese characters, then held it closer to the journalist's face. Huang looked again and curled her lip. 'Calligraphy with a spray can? There are drips and runs and no rhythm to the strokes. I can make out only part of it. Those strokes on the right are the

ideogram for horse, but that stuff on the left is weird. It might be some sort of hybrid character. I don't recognise it.'

Ford was watching her, her eyes darting from Ford to Kavanagh and then towards Langley's office. 'You can't read it?' he said.

'You know how many characters there are in written Chinese?' Huang said. Her voice wavered and when Ford looked at her she moved her eyes down and to the left, and he knew that she was hiding something.

'But it's something about a horse?' said Kavanagh, putting her phone in her pocket. She reached inside her jacket and brought out the book from Doyle's apartment and showed the cover to Huang.

Ford's eyes lit up, then he smiled. 'That wildlife website Alannah was looking at, show me that.'

Huang scrolled through the web history, pushing out her elbows to make herself some room to use the computer. She clicked on an item and the screen changed to show a new page, the writing all Chinese, but the photo in the masthead was familiar. It showed a small brown horse with a black mane like a yard broom. Kavanagh tapped the cover of the book, her finger on the same photo of the horse. 'All this Chinese writing, can we change it to English?'

Huang clicked a little American flag in the header and the text changed to English, the title now reading: 'Help to save the Mongolian Wild Horse.' The three of them were silent while they read the introduction to the website.

'This is hopeless,' said Kavanagh. 'Bleeding heart animal lovers, badly translated. Why was Alannah looking at this crap?'

'Patience,' said Ford, laying a hand on her shoulder. 'There's a notice board and a forum page, where people can chat to each other. Let's see where that takes us.'



The screen changed again to a list of user names and the titles of threads they had started. The text was mostly in English, with some Chinese.

‘There!’ said Kavanagh, stabbing the computer screen with her thumb and making it rock again. ‘That name there, Popeye: that’s Alannah.’

‘She’s used that name before?’ said Huang.

‘Popeye Doyle,’ said Kavanagh. ‘It was an old joke, how she had superhuman strength when she was drunk. Open it.’

Huang clicked on the name and a series of posts came up, each one a line of numbers in pairs.

‘Bingo!’ said Ford under his breath, squeezing Kavanagh’s shoulder. Huang flexed her elbows again to make herself some room between them.

‘It’s all in code,’ said Ford, ‘and the entire thread is just two users, Alannah is only talking to one other user, called Li Tieguai. Who’s she?’

‘It’s a he,’ said Huang, ‘and it’s a fake name.’

‘I figured,’ said Ford. ‘Who uses their real name on the internet? We need to send this guy a message. Make contact with him.’

He grabbed the book off the desk and started flicking through the pages, looking for words to turn into code. When he looked up Huang was still giving him that look.

‘You can’t send a message from here,’ she said. ‘It isn’t ethical. You can’t impersonate Alannah.’

‘I’m not,’ said Ford. ‘I’m impersonating somebody using an alias and communicating in code. I’m sure your ethics are elastic about that.’

‘No, they’re not.’ This was Langley speaking. They all looked around and he was right there, standing in the open doorway to his office. ‘You’ve got what you came for,’ he said. ‘Now go use it to find Alannah.’

Ford elbowed Huang to one side and grabbed the computer mouse. He clicked on the message box and rapidly typed two digits separated by a full stop, then tapped the Enter key before Huang could react.

‘We just asked you not to do that,’ said Langley, stepping out from the doorway.

‘The message had to come from this computer,’ said Ford. ‘This Li guy, he’ll know the IP address.’

‘I think you’d better go now,’ said Langley.

‘We need copies of all Alannah’s files, so we can look through her research,’ said Kavanagh.

‘I said you could look at it here,’ said Langley. ‘I never said you could make copies, and now you’ve abused my trust. Nicole will walk you out, unless you’d like me to get Bob up here.’

‘Does Bob do the rough stuff?’ asked Kavanagh.

‘You don’t want to find out,’ said Langley as they walked away from him towards the lift.

When they were out of earshot Kavanagh said softly, ‘That message you sent. Just two digits. What was the message?’

Ford allowed himself a smile. ‘It was right there on the first page,’ he said. ‘One word: help.’

**10.**

Kavanagh stood by the Ducati putting her helmet on, staring through the glass at the old security guard, who was staring right back at her, a small smile on his face. He winked at her and licked his lips. She winked back and then turned to Ford.

He was lighting a cigarette, blowing smoke into the night air, and staring at the sign on the window telling him smoking was not permitted within twenty metres of the front door.

Ford looked up at the glass façade, the lights going out on the upper floor. 'What a soulless place. Makes me want to get back on the mines, away from all this corporate bullshit.'

Kavanagh ignored him. 'This didn't get us as far as I'd hoped,' she said.

'Far enough,' said Ford, smoke escaping from the corner of his mouth. 'We've found this Li Tieguai. I think he can help us.'

Kavanagh straddled the bike and flashed a bored look at Ford. 'So now where?'

He dropped his cigarette and pulled on his helmet. 'I need to get online,' he said. 'I want to decode Alannah's messages. Maybe there's a trail to this guy.'

'Do you have a computer?'

'No. I used Diane's, and it's gone. Do you have a machine?'

Kavanagh hesitated. 'Yes,' she said. Ford looked at her eyes, shaded under the visor, trying to read her.

'You don't want me at your place?'

She waited a second too long before she said, 'Get on. It's fine.' They didn't speak again until they pulled into the underground car park of her apartment block in East Perth. Kavanagh cut the engine and its roar reverberated around the bare concrete undercroft before the silence returned. They walked together to the lift and she didn't

she speak, aware that he was looking at her. She opened the door to her apartment, stepped inside and walked straight to the kitchen. She pulled the gun from her jeans, grateful to relieve herself of the discomfort, and took the book out of her jacket and laid them both on the counter. As she unzipped her jacket she caught Ford watching her. He looked at the gun without expression, nodded once and then he was looking around the apartment at the bare walls and the plain furniture. He saw the window and went to it, sliding the glass door open and stepping outside, leaning on the rail and looking at the lights of the casino across the river. Kavanagh knew he was waiting for her to join him, and she was happy to let him stand out there until he got bored.

He put his head back inside the room. 'Nice view,' he said. 'Is this a rental?'

Kavanagh scowled. 'I own it.'

'There's no trace of you here,' said Ford, walking around the room.

'I used to rent it out when I was in Kalgoorlie.'

'You got anything to drink?'

Kavanagh opened the freezer and took out a frosty bottle of vodka and put it on the table, then opened the cupboard and found two shot glasses.

'You and me in the kitchen drinking vodka shots,' said Ford. 'Like old times.' When she ignored him he opened the bottle, poured himself a shot and said, 'Where's your computer?'

'Pour me a shot and I'll go get it for you.' Ford picked up the glasses and the bottle, tucked the horse book under his chin, and walked over to the table. Kavanagh came in from the bedroom carrying her laptop and put it down in front of him as he was filling both glasses. She opened the screen and logged in. When it chimed she swivelled the keyboard towards Ford and said, 'All yours.'

Kavanagh sipped at her vodka and watched as Ford opened the browser and found the Mongolian Horse forum, his fingers tapping lightly across the keys, his eyes flicking from left to right, leaning close to the screen, the blue light reflecting off his eyes.

‘Won’t you need Alannah’s password to log in to the site?’ asked Kavanagh.

Ford snorted. ‘Not a problem,’ he said, his face twisted in a smug smile. ‘I watched that journalist when she logged in, got the password as she typed it. Even if I hadn’t seen it, it would have been one of the first passwords I would have guessed, a favourite of every conspiracy theorist: TRUSTNO1.’

His fingers flicked over the keys again, but then they slowed and the self-satisfied grin dissolved from his face. His mouth dropped open. ‘It’s all gone,’ he whispered.

Kavanagh leaned in to see the screen. ‘What’s gone?’

‘All the messages from Li Tieguai. All the threads, every coded message. Everything’s been deleted.’

‘Who could do that?’

‘Only Alannah or this Li Tieguai.’

‘You think he’s covering his tracks, trying to disappear?’

‘No. I think Nicole Huang did this,’ said Ford, leaning back on his chair, He knocked back the vodka and looked at the bottle. ‘She had the password. She’s fucked us.’

‘So we go back to the newspaper,’ said Kavanagh.

‘What good would that do?’ said Ford. ‘I figured she knew more than she was telling us. I could see the panic in her eyes when she saw the graffiti.’ He poured himself another drink and held the glass up to the light, as if looking for an answer in the clear spirit. ‘We still have this Li Tieguai’s username. We can write to him.’

‘He didn’t reply to the first message.’

'Then we need to stir him up a bit.' Ford emptied the glass, put it down on the table, and picked up the horse book. He flicked through it, looking for the right words to code, licking his lips as he mouthed each word silently to himself. He typed the numbers into the computer.

'What are you telling him?' asked Kavanagh.

*'Danger. Meet me.'*

'Danger? Who for, us or him?'

'Take it either way,' said Ford. 'It pays to be ambiguous.'

The computer chimed. 'He replied already,' said Ford. Kavanagh read the message, four pairs of numbers.

'You got a pencil?' asked Ford.

Kavanagh went to the kitchen, opened the second drawer, and rummaged until she found the stub of a pencil. She walked up behind Ford and held it out for him, over his shoulder, leaning over him to look at the computer screen. She caught the scent of him. He smelled of liquor and tobacco and simple honest sweat. He took the pencil from her and their fingers touched, the first time she had felt his skin since they had lain together in the old iron bedstead in Marble Bar, wrapped in a thin sheet soaked with both their sweat.

Ford looked at the stub of pencil, sighed at the bluntness of it, then started to thumb through the book and write the corresponding words inside the cover. When he had finished he held up the message so she could read it: *'Wrong address. Prove identity.'*

Ford tapped the pencil on the table and she heard his breath shorten. 'Now we're fucked,' he said. 'He must have checked the IP address and he knows we're not writing from Alannah's desk or her laptop.'

'Is there any way we can bluff him that we are Alannah?'

‘Doubt it,’ said Ford. ‘I’m sure they’ll have set up some way of verifying each other’s identity, for this kind of situation.’

Ford started flicking through book, finding words and jotting down numbers, then he started typing. Kavanagh followed the numbers as they appeared on the screen, then saw her own name typed out in plain text.

‘You’re telling him my name?’

‘There’s no way to encode it, it doesn’t appear in the book.’

‘We can’t be certain that he knows Alannah’s real identity. She could be just an alias he talks to on the net.’

‘Why wouldn’t he know her? If he is a confidential source, he must know she is a journalist, someone he trusts.’

‘But he doesn’t know us. He has no reason to trust us.’

‘I’m taking a punt that Alannah may have mentioned you, or maybe he’s done his research and seen your name connected to hers.’ He pressed the send key before Kavanagh could protest.

‘What’s that fucking message?’ she hissed.

Ford took a deep breath and translated it for her. *‘My name is Kavanagh. Friend of Popeye. She is missing. Help me. Meet me.’*

They both watched the screen intently, the room silent except for the sound of their breathing, in unison now, their breath shallow.

‘Come on,’ whispered Kavanagh.

‘Give him time,’ said Ford. ‘He needs to code his message.’

As he spoke the reply appeared on the screen, a long line of numbers. Ford grabbed the book and started translating. He held up the finished message for Kavanagh: *‘Tomorrow. Will tell place one hour before.’*

Kavanagh sighed and walked across the apartment, thinking. She came back to the table and sat in the chair opposite Ford. He closed the laptop and stared back at her.

‘I’ll take you home,’ she said. ‘I’ll come pick you up in the morning when we get the message.’

Ford kept staring. ‘I can’t go back to that house.’

‘But you can’t stay here,’ Kavanagh said. She was trying to figure it out, why she didn’t want him there, and if she let him stay, whether it would be out of pity or hope, when the doorbell rang. She saw Ford twitch at the noise, then straighten in his chair and look towards the door. ‘You get many visitors this time of night?’ he asked.

Kavanagh felt her heart pound in her chest as she stood up. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I’ve never had anyone in this apartment.’ She stepped over to the kitchen and picked up the revolver, and stepped lightly to the door, holding it low behind her thigh. She looked at Ford and put a finger to her lips. He was standing now and she waved for him to step into the kitchen out of sight.

Kavanagh stepped up to the door and put her eye to the peep hole. On the other side of the door was Nicole Huang, the collar of her jacket turned up and a black beret pulled down over her forehead. If she was trying to look incognito, all she was doing was drawing attention to herself. Kavanagh let out a long breath in relief and opened the door, quickly grabbing Huang by the wrist and pulling her inside. She stuck her head out into the corridor and saw that it was empty, then shut the door and dead-bolted it. When she turned back to the room Huang was staring at the gun, eyes wide behind her spectacles.

‘Sorry,’ said Kavanagh, shoving the Airweight into her jeans. ‘we’re all a bit jumpy this evening.’

Ford stepped out of the kitchen and said ‘Hello again,’ and held up the bottle of vodka. ‘We were just getting started. Would you like to join us?’



Huang took off her beret and adjusted her glasses. 'I don't drink,' she said. 'tea would be nice.'

Ford looked at her, then at the bottle and finally looked at Kavanagh and shrugged. He sat down at the table and poured himself a shot. Kavanagh walked past him into the kitchen and flicked the switch on the kettle. 'Green tea?' she asked.

Huang nodded and took the chair opposite Ford.

'How did you find me?' said Kavanagh, opening the cupboard and taking down a small red teapot and cups.

'I'm a journalist,' said Huang. 'It's what I do.'

Ford was staring at her, waiting with a question. 'All the threads from that Mongolian Horse website have been wiped,' he said. 'Did you do that?'

Huang put her beret on the table and rested both her hands on it, linking her fingers together, taking her time. 'Langley deleted it all,' she said. 'That's why I'm here, to tell you.'

'You were holding something back,' said Ford. 'When we showed you the graffiti, you knew what it was. Your eyes gave you away. Same with the name on the talkboard.'

Huang unlaced her fingers and laid her hands flat on the table, spreading her fingers and staring at them. 'The man you are trying to find, Li Taiguai, he's a Chinese hacker. Alannah found him somehow, through the internet. She only spoke to me about him once before Langley found out about it. After that she kept it to herself.'

'Langley didn't like her using a hacker?' asked Ford.

'Not publicly. I think he turned a blind eye, let her do what she thought necessary to get the story.'

'What story?' said Kavanagh, spooning loose leaves into the teapot.

'Alannah reckoned this hacker could get access to the casino computers, maybe even their security system and phone network. She was hoping he could find where

McCann had hidden his money, prove he'd been laundering it through the Lau's casino in Macau.'

'So why did Langley delete the correspondence with this hacker?'

'He's been spooked ever since Alannah stopped coming to work. He thinks she's gone rogue on him.'

'He doesn't worry that she's gone missing?' said Kavanagh. The kettle clicked off and she poured water into the teapot, then folded her arms and waited for Huang to talk. 'I could see fear in his eyes,' she said.

'You put the wind up him when you said the police might come with a warrant,' said Huang. 'He didn't want any evidence the paper had been engaging hackers, but he didn't know how Alannah had been talking to this guy.'

'So he let us find it for him,' said Kavanagh. She put the teapot in front of Huang along with two small red tea cups.

Huang gave a small bow, putting her head down over the teapot, low enough to smell the steam escaping from the spout. She closed her eyes and nodded her approval.

Ford waited until Huang had poured tea into the cups and sipped from hers before he spoke. 'The graffiti, what does it say?'

Huang slurped the tea in her mouth and swallowed, then said, 'It says *Grass Mud Horse*.'

Kavanagh had her hands wrapped around her cup, enjoying the warmth. She said, 'Is that another name for that stunted Mongolian horse?'

Huang giggled at this. 'No,' she said. 'It's the hacker. He belongs to a group called the Cult of the Grass Mud Horse.'

'What's that about?'

'Who knows where these nerds get their names from?' said Huang. 'Some obscure geek reference I'm sure.'

‘And this Li Tieguai, you said he was using a false name.’

‘That one I know,’ said Huang. ‘Li Tieguai is a Chinese deity, one of the Eight Immortals of Daoism.’

‘You’re a Daoist?’ said Ford.

‘No, I’m a Methodist,’ said Huang, ‘but every Chinese person knows this. Li Tieguai is a bad-tempered old man. He walks with an iron crutch, and he likes to play tricks on people.’

‘Is someone playing a trick on Alannah?’

‘I doubt it. Iron Crutch Li comes down to earth in the form of a beggar. He uses his power to fight for the oppressed and needy.’

‘So how did Alannah find this hacker?’

‘I don’t know for sure. She knew who they were. The Cult had been doing dissident stuff in China. Hacking into the Communist Party servers, exposing corrupt party officials and politicians, publicising environmental cover-ups. They were the ones made public the cyanide spill from that gold mine in Guizhou.’

‘I read about that,’ said Ford. ‘Huge fish kill in the river. Kids got sick, too.’

Huang nodded. ‘Last year they did that Border Haunt on Yu Lan, the Hungry Ghost Festival.

They hacked into the computers at the border security at the Portas do Cerco, the main crossing between Macau and the Chinese mainland. It was a stunt to commemorate twenty-five years since Tianenmen Square. They put the names of the dead into the immigration computers, and for the whole day the border was haunted, showing these dead people crossing the border into Macau and then back out again. The police kept receiving bogus arrest warrants from Beijing in the names of the dead. The Cult called it an artistic and political experiment.’

Huang finished her tea and poured another cup. Kavanagh watched her drink and realised that the small teacup she was drinking from, red clay with no handle, was the same size and shape as the shot glass Ford was using. Ford was several drinks ahead of her, and his eyelids were starting to droop, his mouth go slack. He'd been awake two days straight, two long heartbreaking days, and she knew she didn't have the heart to kick him out. He was staring into the bottom of the glass now, starting to become morose, and when he spoke she could hear a slur in his voice.

'This Iron Crutch,' he said, 'you think he's dangerous?'

'I never met him,' said Huang, 'or even spoken to him.'

'You think this graffiti is from him? Marking his territory, letting us know he did this?'

Huang shook her head. 'He's in Macau.'

'No,' said Ford. 'He's here in Perth. We've arranged to meet him tomorrow.'

Huang put down her tea cup. 'You've been posting on the talkboard?' When Ford nodded she looked distraught and checked her watch. 'Langley might still be monitoring that site. I'd better go back to the office and check if he's been in Alannah's computer.'

'Relax,' said Ford, tapping the book on the table. 'He can't crack the code. Maybe that's why this Iron Crutch used the book code. Old school, eh?'

Huang looked at Ford and then at Kavanagh, a frown on her face. Kavanagh nodded to her and got up, turning towards the door. 'It's late,' she said. 'We'll keep in touch if we find out anything about Alannah.'

Huang followed her to the door. As she left she leaned close to Kavanagh. 'You think she's in danger?'

Kavanagh put a hand on her shoulder and gently guided her through the door. She adopted the bland smile she had been trained to use when visiting grieving relatives,

but she could think of no words to say, scared to say anything that might force her to consider the possibilities. She ushered Huang into the corridor and closed the door.

When she turned back to the room Ford was on his feet, walking unsteadily towards the bedroom. 'Oy,' she shouted. 'Not so fast, tiger. You're on the couch.'

Ford stopped in the middle of the room, spun to his left and took two steps to the couch. He sat down heavily on the edge of it and looked up at her, resting his elbows on his knees.

Ford shook his head and sighed, then lay back on the couch. 'I feel like I'm floating.'

'Yeah, that's good vodka.'

'Not what I meant. I dream that I am floating on the surface of my life, observing it, the outsider looking in. Sometimes it feels like I'm falling backwards and looking up at nothing.'

Kavanagh ignored him and went into the bedroom to find him a blanket and pillow. When she came back he was asleep on his back with his mouth open.

**11.**

Kavanagh was woken by the smell of freshly-brewed coffee. When she came out of the bedroom she was surprised to find Ford sat at the table in front of her laptop, the coffee percolator by his elbow, his hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee and his eyes locked on the screen. He was fully dressed, in the same clothes as the day before. Kavanagh was in the loose tee-shirt and cotton draw-string pants that she slept in, and when Ford looked up at her she saw him look her over, his eyes held by the fact she wore no bra under the loose white cotton.

‘Any message from our guy?’ she asked, and waited for his eyes to move upwards towards hers.

Ford shook his head. ‘Not a peep. Someone else has been on this talkboard too. The messages from last night have been deleted.’

‘Could Iron Crutch have deleted his own thread?’

‘Maybe. Or it could have been Langley.’

Ford looked fresh, no sign of a hangover, his eyes bright, clear and alert, reflecting the blue light from the screen. His hair looked clean and damp, his skin pink and flushed.

‘Did you shower?’ Kavanagh asked.

‘I had a shit, a shave and a shower,’ said Ford, then sipped from his coffee.

‘In my bathroom?’

‘It’s not like it’s en-suite,’ said Ford. ‘Obviously I didn’t wake you. I put my head around the bedroom door and you were snoring.’

‘I figured you’d be the one to sleep in. Maybe I hoped you’d be suffering this morning.’

‘I didn’t drink that much,’ said Ford. ‘It was the exhaustion that caught up with me, not your Swedish surgical spirit. What’s your excuse?’

‘I was enjoying the freedom of being unemployed and getting up late.’

Ford got up and found a second coffee mug like he was already familiar with the kitchen. He filled it from the percolator. When he passed it to her she was looking at his face, noticing how his neck and cheeks were shaved smooth, leaving a moustache of stubble and a goatee, the bristle more salt than pepper. ‘What did you shave with?’ she asked.

‘There was a pink razor in the shower,’ he said.

‘I shave my legs with that.’

‘I figured,’ said Ford. ‘It was clogged with hair, had one of those fat heads with four blades in it. It was too big to work around my nose and lips, hence this distinguished beard I’m cultivating.’

He was right, it did make him look more sophisticated somehow, and he might have pulled it off if he hadn’t been wearing the same crumpled clothes as the night before. Kavanagh drank from her coffee and began to feel more awake. ‘Tell me you didn’t use my toothbrush.’

Ford smiled. ‘I had a rummage through the drawers under the sink and found a new toothbrush. It was still in the packet, so I used it.’

Kavanagh thought about a man going through her bathroom, using her things, and she had to fight the urge to go and check how much of a mess he had made. There were coffee grounds in the sink, and a carton of milk left on the counter, so she could picture a wet towel lying on the bathroom floor.

‘Would you like me to cook up some eggs?’ asked Ford. He sounded chirpy, and it annoyed her. She had not liked seeing him so hollowed-out and morose the night before, but now he was trying to mask it and act positive for the new day, and she hated

the falseness of it. She was still burning with anger and fear and wanted him that way too, fuel for the work ahead.

She looked at the milk spilled on the counter and shook her head at the thought of him making any more mess. 'I'll have muesli,' she said. As she opened the cupboard to find a bowl the computer chimed and Ford's eyes flicked back to the screen. Kavanagh walked behind him and leaned on the back of his chair to look.

'It's him,' said Ford. He grabbed the book and translated the message. '*Are you there?* That's all he's asked. Ford found the code to reply. '*Here.*'

They sat and watched the screen together, neither daring to speak, and then the message appeared in plain text. It read: '*85 Carmel Road. One hour.*'

'That's up in the hills,' said Kavanagh.

Ford typed the address into the computer and a street map and satellite image appeared.

'The address shows up, but I can't see a house,' he said. 'It's a bush block, covered with trees, maybe three acres.'

'Why has he given us the address like that?' said Kavanagh. 'Why no code?'

'Same problem we had,' said Ford. 'The book code falls down when you need proper names or numbers.'

'It's way out in the country,' said Kavanagh. 'I don't like it. We could be walking into a trap.' She walked back into the kitchen with her bowl, looking for the muesli.

'We've only got an hour to get there,' said Ford. 'You need to get dressed.'

Kavanagh filled her bowl and as she poured in the milk she shrugged. 'It'll take thirty minutes to get there on the bike.'

'Good,' said Ford. 'It will give us chance to look the place over. Make sure we're not walking into an ambush.'



Kavanagh walked into the bedroom carrying her bowl and spooning muesli into her mouth. She put the bowl on her dresser, her mouth full, and took a fresh shirt and panties from the drawer. She slipped off her pyjamas and as she stood there naked she sniffed her armpits and didn't mind her smell. She could get away without showering. She pulled on the clean clothes and then took another mouthful of muesli. She found her leather pants in the wardrobe and laid down on the bed to pull them on, breathing in deeply to suck in her belly so that she could pull up the zip. Socks and boots and jacket and she was dressed. She thought about the gun and where she might have left it, then remembered she had slept with it under her pillow. She retrieved it and slipped it down the back of her pants.

When she came out of the bedroom carrying her bowl and chewing, Ford was standing by the door checking his watch. He looked her up and down, taking in the racing leathers and the tight white shirt, and she wished she'd put on a bra. 'Do you have any binoculars?' asked Ford.

'Why, you need a closer look?' said Kavanagh, zipping up her jacket.

'They would be useful if we want to scout this meeting place,' he said, looking her in the eye now.

Kavanagh put her bowl in the sink and turned on the tap, rinsing the bowl and washing the spilled coffee grounds down the drain. She opened the third drawer beside the sink and found a compact pair of field glasses. She threw them across the room to him. 'Not very good quality, but the best I can do.'

'How about the gun,' said Ford. 'Still got that?'

She swivelled her hips to show him the bump in her leathers.

'Is there a weapon for me?' asked Ford.

'I can't trust you with my razor. I'm not giving you a gun.' She ducked into the bathroom and picked up her toothbrush and walked towards the front door brushing

her teeth. 'Did you make us a packed lunch?' She picked the helmets off the coat rack and handed Ford his, then opened the front door and checked her watch. 'Thirty minutes, no problem.'

She rode the Ducati out of the undercroft at full throttle, shooting out into the narrow street and through East Perth to the Farmer Freeway, running orange lights all the way. She accelerated down the on-ramp and when she hit the freeway she was travelling faster than anything else in the mid-morning traffic. She felt the wind buffet her as they crossed the river and was aware of Ford's weight leaning gently into her back as he lowered himself against the wind.

Kavanagh looked downstream, the casino on one side of the river, where Ford had been when his wife died. On the opposite bank she could see the light towers of the cricket ground, which she remembered looming over her when she had left the police station. Ford and her had started on opposite sides, but now they were here together, his arms around her waist.

The freeway linked into Orrong Road and she watched the traffic lights as she approached the first cross-street, judging her speed to reach them just as they changed to green, racing between the lines of cars backed up at the junction. She timed all the other lights the same, and soon they were out among the warehouses and workshops of Welshpool, and then even they fell away and they were out in the country. The road got steeper as it climbed the escarpment, Kavanagh opening up the throttle to maintain her speed uphill, pulling out to pass trucks struggling up the incline. She turned as they crested the ridge, looking out across the flat Perth plain to where the city stood, the small cluster of high-rise offices standing out against the flat monotony of suburban sprawl. Out on the horizon she caught a glint of sunshine on the ocean, out where the blue water merged with the sky.

The road curved through the hills and Kavanagh leaned the bike into the corners, enjoying the power of the bike, forgetting that Ford was behind her, feeling a sudden elation at being out of the city and free from the burden of being a cop. They were passing between vineyards and orchards, the branches heavy with fruit and the leaves just starting to turn with the first hint of autumn.

The road reached a junction and as she slowed she felt Ford tap her on the shoulder. He brought his hand around to show her his phone and the map on the screen. It was too small to see through her visor and when she shook her head Ford signalled for her to turn left and then right. Kavanagh saw the sign for Carmel Road as she made the second turn and knew they were close. She throttled back and reduced the engine noise to a low whine as she crept up the road. She could hear Ford talking now, telling her it was another hundred metres on the left.

There were few houses on the street, some with small orchards attached, hobby farms on a few acres. There were undeveloped blocks of bushland between the houses, gum tress and wattle growing up to the road's edge. Ford pointed over her shoulder at the small sign nailed to a tree, hand-painted with the number 85. The tree stood at the end of a narrow sandy track that disappeared into the bush. Kavanagh kicked the bike into neutral, cut the engine and let it coast to a stop at the end of the track. Ford was off the pinion as soon as the bike came to a stop.

Kavanagh could only see twenty metres down the track before it curved away and was lost in the trees. Ford walked to the bend and looked further up the lane but turned back to her shaking his head. He jogged back to her and leaned in close to speak, and when she lifted her visor she could smell the toothpaste on his breath.

'I can't see anything in there,' he said. 'The track twists too much. No sign of a house.'

Kavanagh swung her leg off the bike and looked up and down the road. The blocks either side were bushland, as was the block opposite. The nearest building was a neat brick bungalow with a small vineyard between it and the road. An old man in dungarees and a broad-brimmed hat was picking grapes, his back bent.

She checked her watch. It was ten thirty and she allowed herself a smile at having made the trip in only thirty minutes. 'We need to get my bike off the road,' she said. She pushed it onto the track and they walked together into the trees. She pushed the bike along a rut in the track cut by the recent passage of a car, the tyre tread clearly visible in the sand. In fifty metres they were surrounded by banksia scrub, the undergrowth shielding any view of the surrounding country, the tree canopy meeting overhead, the shade getting deeper the further they walked into the bush.

Ford put his hand up for her to stop, then pointed ahead and to the left where something white was visible between the trunks of the trees. They ducked behind a screen of low grevillea and as they got closer they could see through the bushes to the caravan parked in a small clearing on the opposite side of the track. Kavanagh turned the bike around and leaned it against a tree, pointing back up the track. She tapped Ford on the shoulder and gestured for him to follow her. She walked to the right, away from the track, skirting around to a small embankment that she hoped would give them a clear view across the caravan. She dropped to her hands and knees and waved Ford down next to her, and they crawled through the undergrowth until they found a gap that allowed them a view. The caravan was only thirty metres away, one end of it in the clearing and the other wedged between the trunks of two large eucalypts, the branches meeting over it. It was an old model, curved at each end with a gently arching roof covered in a carpet of dried gum leaves fallen from the canopy above. It had been there long enough for grass and weeds to grow up underneath it and hide the wheels. The big window in the end of the caravan was closed with curtains, a bold seventies pattern that

might once have been burnt orange but had faded to beige. The only sign that the van had been lived in recently was the clean white satellite dish on a pole in the clearing, pointing upwards through a gap in the trees to a small patch of blue sky above. There were cables draped from the top of the pole to a hole drilled in the wall of the van. There was no vehicle in sight, but a small rectangle of flattened grass beside the track showed where one had been parked.

‘You think he’s in there?’ whispered Ford.

‘We sit and wait to find out. It still feels like a trap to me.’

There was no sound from the caravan, the only noise the squawking of a mob of white cockatoos high in the trees. There was the occasional crash through the leaves above as the cockatoos ate gum nuts off the branches and dropped the empty husks. Kavanagh could hear Ford breathing beside her as he lay on his chest, leaning on his elbows and looking through the binoculars. He tapped her on the shoulder and passed her the field glasses and leaned close to whisper to her, the smell of toothpaste now mixed with the scent of eucalypt from the fallen leaves that covered the ground.

‘There’s a security camera over the door,’ he said. ‘It’s very small. Just a webcam, but it’s in plain sight. There’s another on the tree trunk high up, takes in the whole clearing. You can see the cable snaking up the trunk.’

Kavanagh checked the cameras and saw they were fitted with movement sensors and she tried to figure how many more there might be. There had to be one at the entrance to the track to see any arrivals. If they had been seen, Iron Crutch would have had plenty of opportunity to clear out or lay an ambush. The track continued past the caravan heading further into the block. There could be nothing in that direction except an exit.

She heard a car engine from the direction of the road and checked her watch. It was still twenty minutes before eleven. The noise from the car dropped, and she could hear

nothing, but then she heard it again, labouring in low gear and getting louder, coming down the track towards them. She looked up the track, and caught a glimpse of something moving among the trees. Three cockatoos came flying low up the track, startled by the noise, and then the car was out into the clearing in front of them, a black BMW Seven Series, the paintwork polished to a slick finish. It slowed when it came in sight of the caravan, then inched forward into the clearing and stopped in the rectangle of flattened grass. Ford got to his knees and started to stand but Kavanagh pulled him back down. 'There's two of them in the car,' she said. 'This isn't our boy.'

The engine went silent in the BMW and the squawking of the cockatoos returned. Both front doors on the car opened at once and the driver and passenger appeared, and from this distance they looked the same, both wearing black business suits and narrow ties, their black hair neatly parted and as slick as the paintwork on the BMW, their eyes hidden behind aviator sunglasses. They looked around warily, glanced up at the birds, then turned their attention to the caravan.

The gloom was too much for the passenger, and he took off his sunglasses. Kavanagh raised the binoculars and focused on the man's face. He was Chinese, and she guessed by the creases around his eyes that he was similar age to Ford, somewhere in his forties, or maybe older. His face was pock-marked and leathery, and as she looked at him he smiled, showing yellow teeth. The driver took off his glasses too, and his face looked similar, same eyes, same hair, same suit. They could have been twins if the driver had not been twenty years younger and his skin unblemished.

She took out her phone and selected the camera, remembering to set it to silent, and poked it through the foliage to get a clear shot of the clearing, the caravan and both men. She hoped that the light and the resolution would be good enough to pick up their faces. The passenger beckoned the driver to him with a wave of his fingers and waited for the young man to walk around the car to him. He spoke quietly with him, their

heads close together, the driver's bowed head making it clear that the older man was in charge.

They walked together to the caravan and the passenger stood back while the driver tried the door, leaning to one side as he turned the handle. He let the door swing open and waited, flattening himself against the side of the caravan. He looked towards his boss, who had a clear view inside the van, and when the older man nodded the driver ducked his head through the door then stepped inside. The passenger looked around the clearing, then up at the birds overhead, before stepping into the caravan and closing the door behind him.

Kavanagh pulled the Smith and Wesson from her pants and checked the cylinder, then lay flat on the ground, gun in hand, watching the caravan and thinking.

'Are we going down there?' whispered Ford.

Kavanagh shook her head. 'We wait.'

The sound of footsteps on the hollow floor of the caravan reached them, along with an occasional thump from inside. They saw the curtain twitch once, as if someone had leaned against it. The door opened again and the men came out, both with their hands full. The driver carried a laptop in one hand, and under his other arm a large black box, the weight of it pulling him over to one side. Kavanagh looked through the glasses and saw it was a computer, the manufacturer's logo visible on the top of it. The older man carried a large sheaf of papers, and stopped outside the open door of the caravan to read them. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, then a lighter, and smoked as he leafed through the papers, a thin column of grey smoke rising slowly to the overhanging branches. The driver put the computers in the trunk of the car and took his place behind the wheel and waited. By the time his boss had reached the last document, his cigarette had burned down, the filter hanging from his lip. He took between finger and thumb and flicked it through the door of the caravan. He found his lighter again and

held its flame to the corner of the first page until it caught, a trail of black smoke rising now. He fanned the sheaf of papers until he was happy that they were all alight, and then tossed them into the caravan. He put his sunglasses on and as he watched the smoke coming out of the caravan he smiled. Kavanagh could see the flames reflected in his mirrored lenses and took another picture of him with her phone.

He walked slowly to the car, and as he opened the door the engine started and when he sat down the car started moving backwards, reversing down the narrow lane, the gearbox whining.

Kavanagh waited until it was out of sight, hidden by the trees and the curve of the lane, and then she was up and running, crashing through the undergrowth, pushing branches out of her path, twigs catching at her jacket as she forced her way through. She sprinted across the clearing and stopped at the door of the caravan. The flames were concentrated to the right of the door, where a foam mattress had been spread between bench seats to make a bed. The sheets were already burning and the flames were catching the tips of the floral curtains. She took off her leather jacket, draped it over her head, took a deep breath and stepped inside. She turned away from the flames, staying low beneath the cloud of smoke gathering under the roof, looking down at her feet. She could feel the heat of the flames radiating through the jacket at her back. She stumbled into something blocking her way, and lifting the jacket she saw a desk built across the far end, a large sheet of plywood spanning the full width of the caravan, three large computer monitors filling most of it, keyboards and loose wires scattered across it, the flashing lights of modems piercing through the smoke. She checked the floor, opened the cupboards, but the place was empty. She stumbled back out into the daylight, felt the cool air hit her face and she sucked it in gladly, dragging the jacket off her head and throwing it in the grass. Ford was standing watching her, fear etched into his face.



‘He’s not in there,’ she said, breathing hard and then coughing, tasting the smoke in her mouth, her eyes streaming.

‘Can we put out the fire?’ said Ford.

Kavanagh shook her head. The bed foam was alight now, and the flames were licking up the walls. ‘If the roof catches fire, all those dry leaves will go up,’ she said. ‘We need to get out of here before the neighbours see the smoke and panic about a bush fire.’

She walked down the track to where she had hidden the Ducati, and she was astride it with the engine running by the time Ford had caught up.

‘At least it wasn’t a trap,’ he said.

‘Sure it was. The hacker led us to this place, and he must have known that talkboard was being watched, and he didn’t know who we were. He posted this address and waited to see who turned up.’

‘The webcams,’ said Ford. ‘He was watching us all the time. He’s probably still watching.’

Kavanagh tilted her head, signalling for Ford to get on the bike, and once he was on the pinion she set off slowly down the track. She took one look over her shoulder and saw flames through the trees. When she turned her head back to the track she was looking at the black BMW, blocking them on the track just as it opened out onto the road. It was pointing towards them, both driver and passenger staring at them through the windscreen.

Kavanagh judged the space on either side of the car and then accelerated towards them, aiming to pass on the driver’s side. The driver opened his door, and the edge of it caught against the trunk of a tree before it was fully open. He put a leg out and tried to stand, squeezing his body out of the car, but stopped when saw Kavanagh speeding towards him. She watched him hesitate, maybe thinking to himself that he could block

her with the door, but calculating the damage to the car and himself. In the last seconds he decided that Kavanagh had no intention of slowing and he ducked back inside and pulled the door shut. As Kavanagh passed the car she felt the Ducati start to slide in the soft sand at the edge of the track, the rear wheel losing traction. She adjusted the throttle and tried to control it but the rear end fishtailed and she felt the impact as her foot peg hit the side of the car and gouged a long line down the door and side panel of the BMW. The bike fishtailed away from the car and then they were past and out onto the bitumen. As she turned down the road the BMW came shooting out of the track backwards, the engine screaming. Kavanagh glanced over her shoulder, past Ford's wide eyes, watching the front end of the BMW slew around and the rear wheels smoke as the driver put down the power.

She relaxed now, knowing that she had enough of a lead on him, and twisted the throttle open and felt the bike surge beneath her. She looked ahead to see the approaching junction, then checked her mirrors and saw she had about five seconds on the BMW. She threw the bike left and looked towards the next turn into Welshpool Road and back towards Perth. She made the right turn before the car had appeared at the previous junction, and so she sped along the wide road she scanned left and right for a suitable driveway. She spotted one off to the left, lined on both sides with tall hedge and she decided quickly. She stepped hard on the brake and threw the Ducati into the laneway and killed the engine as soon as they were hidden by the hedge.

She could hear the BMW behind them, its engine roaring as it powered away from the junction. Kavanagh looked around and watched it as it flashed past the end of the drive, both driver and passenger staring at the road ahead.

Kavanagh raised the visor on her helmet and caught the smell of smoke still lingering on her jacket. She found her phone and tapped the screen into life.

'Who are you calling?' Said Ford. He had stepped off the bike and was walking the few strides to the end of the lane, stretching his legs.

'The emergency services,' said Kavanagh. 'We'd better call in that bushfire before it gets out of control.' As she tapped in the number the phone chimed with a text message. She waved at Ford to come back. He was looking up the road, satisfying himself that the car wasn't coming back.

As he walked back Kavanagh held up the screen towards him. 'It's a message from Iron Crutch,' she said. 'He wants to meet us in Scarborough beach in thirty minutes.'

**12.**

The sky was bright, with high cloud, but there was a brisk westerly off the ocean. Ford could see white caps on the water as they came over the top of the ridge, and Rottnest Island was just a dark line in the haze and spray near the horizon.

Kavanagh stopped at the lights at the bottom of the hill, the hotel towering over them, and let the Ducati idle. There wasn't much traffic. When the lights turned she shot across the intersection, banked around the clock in the middle of the roundabout, and found a space in a line of motorcycles outside the row of cafes facing the ocean. She killed the engine and rocked the Ducati onto its stand. Most of the restaurants had yet to open for lunch, but the sandwich bar and the café had late breakfast customers. There were a few couples sat at the outdoor tables drinking coffee and watching the sky for patches of blue between the clouds.

Ford went into the sandwich bar. Only a couple of tables were occupied with young surfers. Two of them were still in their wetsuits, the tops unzipped and hanging loose around their waists, the arms trailing on the floor. Their bare chests were covered in goose bumps, and their long bleached hair was wet, but they didn't seem bothered. They would have been out in the surf since dawn, making the most of the swell, and now they were ploughing through a high carb breakfast. Their flat stomachs and youthful vigour didn't make Ford feel any better about himself.

He bought two coffees in cardboard cups and carried them outside. Kavanagh accepted hers without comment and together they headed towards the ocean. They crossed the cycle path, dodged a couple of joggers and a group of cyclists in matching lycra, and found a spot on the limestone wall that fronted the ocean. Ford looked out over the broad sweep of beach and dunes as he spooned the froth off his coffee with the flat wooden stirrer that reminded him of a tongue depressor. To the south the beach

stretched unbroken towards Fremantle and the Norfolk Pines along the horizon merged into the dock cranes at the port. To the north it curved gracefully to the point at Trigg.

There were only a few body-boarders at Scarborough where the waves were breaking directly onto the beach, but there was a decent break up at the point and he could see surfers lined up far out, black like seals in their wetsuits.

Ford sipped at his scalding coffee and watched Kavanagh. She was staring out to sea, holding her coffee cup under her mouth and letting the steam rise up into her nose. She casually took the gun from the back of her pants and slid it into the side pocket of her jacket, keeping her hand on it, the muzzle pointing forward, drinking her coffee with her left hand. She seemed to have no desire to speak so Ford lit a cigarette and they stood in silence waiting.

He was on his second cigarette when his phone chimed with a text message and Kavanagh looked at him. He put his empty coffee cup on the wall and fished in his pocket. The sender was marked as private, and the message was just a single word: 'wheelchair.' He turned the screen so Kavanagh could read it, and together they looked out over the beach, their eyes busy.

To their left the wall stretched further into the dunes, zigzagging down towards the amphitheatre at the centre of the beach. Each turn in the wall was marked by a stone buttress, built to resemble an undulating castle rampart with a circular lookout that gave views up the beach. There were people everywhere: joggers and cyclists on the path, couples standing hand in hand watching the waves, kids running up and down the steps. Ford saw the man in the wheelchair at the highest corner of the wall where it jutted out into the dunes at a right-angle. He nudged Kavanagh and nodded towards him but her eyes told him that she had already seen him. Without a word they set off towards him.

Ford looked him over as they approached. He could only have been in his twenties, Chinese eyes staring out to sea from behind round frameless glasses. He wore an old green combat jacket and black beanie pulled down low over his ears. He had a tartan blanket across his lap, hanging down around his knees. When they got within ten metres the man turned and looked at the cigarette in Ford's hand. 'You got a light?' he asked. He held up a narrow roll-up and put it to his lips and Ford handed him the stub of his cigarette.

'So you're the hacker?' said Ford.

'Don't call me that,' said the man in the wheelchair. He took the stub and lit his cigarette, inhaled deeply and held it down. He blew out a long stream of smoke and Ford could smell the marijuana in it.

'What do you prefer?' asked Kavanagh. 'Hactivist, cyber-warrior?'

'You can call me Iron Crutch.'

'I can't call you that,' said Kavanagh. 'It's ridiculous. What's your real name?'

'Iron Crutch works for me,' said the hacker. 'Although I admit it sounds better in Chinese. But I doubt either of you have mastered the four tones.' He took off his black beanie to scratch his scalp, his hair worn short in a buzz cut.

'You've got a hint of an Aussie accent there,' said Ford.

'I did a Masters in computer science at Curtin. Had a year living in Vic Park.'

Ford said, 'I might get you to teach me a few tricks on the computer.'

'If you want assistance from IT then I suggest you log a request at your helpdesk. I'm not that kind of little Chinese guy.'

'You look the part,' said Ford.

'Yeah. What a cliché buster. The Chinese kid is good with computers. I'm a bad driver too. Any other stereotypes you want to throw at me? I was a violin prodigy as a

child, you know, and I'm a constant disappointment to my mother because my school grades weren't good enough to become a doctor.'

He took another deep drag on his joint and they waited for him to exhale.

'Don't look at my joint like that,' he said. 'I don't ever pass it.'

'I was just thinking,' said Ford. 'You do all this secret shit to get us here, then bring attention to yourself by firing that thing up.'

'I'm self-medicating,' said Iron Crutch. 'It helps with the pain in my legs. Nobody is close enough to smell it.'

Ford looked at the man's legs and noticed the mud on his shoes and the scuffing around the edge. 'How do you get around that caravan in a wheelchair?' he said.

'I can walk,' said Iron Crutch, waving the joint towards the single aluminium crutch strapped to the back of his wheelchair. 'I'm just not very good over distance. I didn't know how long I might be here waiting, so I figured I'd sit down.'

'You can drive too,' said Ford. 'Where are you parked?'

The hacker didn't answer, turning to look towards the horizon, his eyes narrowing. 'I don't understand the Australian fascination with the ocean,' he said. 'I can't bear it. Makes me sick.'

Kavanagh looked restless. 'And where's the rest of this Cult of yours?' she said. 'Or are you an army of one?'

Iron Crutch laughed at that. 'Were you expecting us to come mob-handed?' He took a final toke of the joint, licked his fingers and pinched it out. He put the stub carefully in the top pocket of his jacket. 'There were eight members when The Cult started. The Eight Immortals. Three have gone silent, most likely in jail in China, or probably dead. Royal Uncle Cao is in hiding in Guangzhou or maybe Shenzen. Two are in the States, and Immortal Woman is in Europe somewhere. France, maybe.'

'Immortal Woman?' says Kavanagh. 'Is that from a comic book or something?'

'It's Taoist mythology,' says Iron Crutch. 'Stories that are two thousand years old.'

'If three of you are dead, then you're not so immortal.'

'When one of us falls, two more take their place, and adopt the name, so it lives on.'

'And you're the leader of the gang?'

Iron Crutch looked at Kavanagh for a moment, getting the measure of her before he spoke. 'We're anarchists,' he said. 'Having a leader would open us up to Beijing's traditional strategy of counter-leadership targeting. We prefer to stay anonymous.'

'And this Grass Mud Horse, what's that?'

'Another creature from our mythology,' said Iron Crutch. 'Something not so old. Again, it sounds better in Chinese.'

Kavanagh turned away. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet, looking up and down the seafront, her hand still in her pocket. 'Do you know where Alannah is?'

'No. I don't,' said Iron Crutch. 'I've never known where she is. That's the point of internet anonymity. That's why I don't know where the other members of the Cult are.'

'But you know her real name and that she works at the Gazette. When was the last time you had contact with her?'

'Two days ago.'

'Did she sound worried, had anything changed?'

'No.'

'So what was the deal between you two?'

'She wanted me to hack into the Lau family. Find out where McCann was stashing his money, and any dirt I could find on him.'

'Why you?'

'She heard that the Cult had already hacked into the Lau family's casino in Macau.'

'How did Alannah find you?' asked Ford.



‘She’s a journalist. It’s what she does. Well, we let her think she found us, but we’d been watching her circling around McCann. There are certain dark corners of the net where introductions can be made and things like this discussed.’

‘So why did you help her?’

‘She recognised a kindred spirit,’ said Iron Crutch, smiling.

‘No, that’s not it,’ said Kavanagh. ‘She’d never appeal to someone’s morality, she prefers leverage. What did she have on you?’

‘It wasn’t like that. It just happened that our goals coincided. I’ve been looking for someone, too.’

‘Did you find him?’ asked Kavanagh.

Iron Crutch turned away, put his beanie back on and pulled it down over his ears.

‘No, he found me.’

Kavanagh held up her phone, the screen facing Iron Crutch, showing the photograph she had taken of the man torching the caravan. ‘Who is he?’

Iron Crutch retrieved his own phone from his pocket and held up the screen with a similar image, better quality, a close-up. Even from a distance Ford recognised the pock-marked face, the smile, and the slicked black hair.

‘His name is Zhou Jingshan. He was the Chief of Police in Guangzhou.’

‘And you set us up with him?’ said Ford

‘No, that’s not what happened.’

‘You posted your address on that talkboard in plain language. You told us a time. He showed up thinking you’d be there. I’m guessing by what he did to your caravan that you’re not friends. We could have been burning in there and you’d have been watching it all on your little webcam.’

‘I didn’t know it would be him showed up.’

‘But you knew someone would,’ said Ford. ‘You used us as bait.’

Kavanagh still had her phone in her hand, the screen now showing a picture of the graffiti from Ford's house.

'Is this meant for you?'

'Where did you find that?'

'On the wall at Ford's House. Same thing at Alannah's apartment.'

Iron Crutch leaned over the side of the wheelchair, taking a long look at the picture. 'A warning from Zhou,' he said. 'Letting me know he is onto me.'

'Why the daft code with the book?'

'That was just a bit of theatre for Alannah's benefit. I'd showed her how slack the security was on her newspaper's computer network and she got paranoid.'

'What about you, are you paranoid?'

'My caravan is on fire. I've got every reason to be paranoid. Yeah, the book code was absurdly fucking quaint. Doyle had asked her editor to set up an encrypted route for communication but he refused. So we used the book instead. Just a bit of a joke, just yanking Doyle's chain. For the lulz.'

'The what?'

'The lulz. For shit and giggles.'

Kavanagh didn't smile. 'Why is Zhou in Perth. Is he looking for you?'

'No, he's running away,' said Iron Crutch. 'He's corrupt, your typical Champagne Maoist. Using his job to take money. Bribes from local business, and skimming from organized crime. Kickbacks from politicians. He made millions on the side, and everyone he dealt with he built up a whole lot of dirt on them, made sure they could never renounce him.'

'You think he laundered his money through the Lau's casino in Macau?'

'McCann wasn't the first, you know. Zhou had a relationship with the Lau casino in Macau. He would help them collect their debts on the mainland and in return they

would launder money that he had extorted from his other enterprises, get it out of the country for him. Invest it in properties in Vancouver, Sydney, Hawaii. Once a month Zhou would walk into the casino in Macau and deposit two million in cash. He would play the tables and lose ten per cent. Sometimes he lost more, but never more than twenty per cent. He then goes back to the hotel with a nice clean check from the casino for the balance, payable from a Hong Kong Bank. I have proof of this. The Lau's kept a dirt file on him too, footage of him with his girlfriend gambling, with prostitutes in his room, meeting with known triad identities, cashing his winnings in Hong Kong. The Cult hacked the database and we found the file and we went public with it. We hoped it would blow back on several politicians in the People's Republic.'

'And Alannah asked you to find whether a similar dirt file existed on McCann?'

'Yes.'

'What did you find?'

'Not much. Not in Macau. I didn't find a file on him, but I found out that the Lau family are going to refinance his company, allow him to refloat out of bankruptcy.'

'We know that. We know Diane pegged a gold claim for the Lau family in Marble Bar. It sits right at the head of the valley containing McCann's iron ore deposits. It forces McCann to deal only with the Lau family. Tell us something we don't know.'

'I never got the opportunity to find out anything else. Once we blew the whistle on Zhou they realized there was a security breach and they changed all their computer security protocols. I've been trying to hack back in ever since.'

'So how did you both end up in Perth?'

'Zhou arrived here first. I was in Hong Kong when we put out all the scandal we could find on him over the internet. Posted it on Chinese language news sites, ones based overseas that Beijing couldn't censor. It got the attention of the Central Committee of Discipline Inspection.'

'Who are they?'

'People you don't want to meet. They're an anti-corruption unit answerable directly to the Politburo. We call them the Fingernail Police. If you get invited to drink tea with them, you're never seen again. They went to Zhou's headquarters in Guangzhou to give him an invitation, but he had disappeared. I traced him through Macau and Hong Kong, where he got a new identity and I lost track of him. I heard he was in Perth and so I came here.'

'And you let him find you?'

'My identity was already compromised. He did me a favour by burning the caravan and everything in it.'

'He took your laptop.'

'There was nothing in there that I couldn't leave behind. The fifth rule of hacker operational security is never to work from your own home.'

'Why didn't you contact me earlier?' asked Kavanagh.

'Ninth rule is that we don't talk to the police.'

'You're talking to me now.'

'You're not police any more.'

'How do you know that?'

'You don't get this computer stuff, do you? For you it's like a kung-fu movie without subtitles.'

Kavanagh didn't react, just stared at him, letting him have his joke, waiting for him to carry on.

'After you contacted me I hacked your police record,' said Iron Crutch. 'I know everything about you. Gareth Ford I know less about. Your police records have been wiped. But I read about the death of your wife. I'm sorry for your loss.'

'What do you know about her death?' said Ford.

‘Only what I read.’

Ford turned to look at Iron Crutch and took a step towards him but Kavanagh grabbed his elbow and pulled him back. He stared out at the sea, made himself focus on the Rottnest Island lighthouse on the horizon. The haze had cleared, burned off by a climbing sun. He could see the wind turbine on the island, tiny at such distance, spinning slowly in the fresh breeze coming off the ocean. He watched it until he was calm enough to speak. ‘Don’t lie to me,’ he said. ‘There’s something you’re leaving out. Diane’s killer took her laptop. Alannah is missing and so is the computer from her apartment. We just watched your buddy Zhou take your laptop from the caravan. There’s a connection. The graffiti and then the computers. From Diane to Alannah to you.’

‘I warned Alannah. Told her that her crusading journalist shit wouldn’t work. She was so used to talking about justice and free speech and the power of law and democracy. None of that means anything to the people we are dealing with here.’

‘You think Zhou has Alannah?’

‘She never understood the power of anonymity. She thought she had some sort of nobility because she put her name to her story. Called me a coward for hiding behind an alias. She refused to consider disappearing.’

‘Is that what you’re going to do, disappear?’

‘I need a new place to live. Mine is burning.’

‘And you need our help?’

‘I used your wife’s computer to get into the casino computer system while she was living there. She had access protocols to some of the casinos systems, and her security was slack. I used it as a bot to launch some back-orifice malware. I hacked the Lau’s email system, and their CCTV footage. I found their little stack of dirt and blackmail.’

‘We’re always talking about the Lau family as if it’s one big organism. Who’s pulling the strings?’

‘Technically the old man, William Lau, is still head of the company, but he’s nearly eighty years old. His children are lining up to see who gets control of the company when he croaks. The casino business is currently run by his eldest son, Robert. He’s the guy who sheltered McCann and your wife in Macau.’

‘Why didn’t Zhou come for Diane in Macau?’

‘She’d already moved back to Australia by the time we blew the whistle on him and he discovered the hack was through Diane’s laptop.’

‘Is that why he they took her computer, and Alannah’s?’

‘I guess so. I knew someone had got into their computers and was trying to get to me, launching attacks against me from Alannah’s laptop. They weren’t very good, couldn’t get past my security.’

‘A reverse hack?’

‘Something like that. Initially I thought it might be the Fingernail Police.’

‘You sound more afraid of them than of Zhou.’

‘I’m not afraid of God, nor am I afraid of ghosts, but I’m scared of being summoned to talk to the Central Committee of Discipline Inspection.’

‘But it wasn’t them, it was Zhou?’

‘Not him doing the hack, probably some hackers he hired to find the security breach.’

‘Mercenaries of the deep web? So why have they taken your computers?’

‘Still trying to find me I guess. Maybe there iss something else in those dirt files that they don’t want anyone seeing. Or maybe they are worried I’ll go public with it. The Communist Party tolerates gambling in Macau. One country, two systems. The greatest piece of hypocritical doublethink in history. But if Beijing finds out that the

Laus have dirt on high ranking Communist Party officials, they may lose patience with them.'

'But anything on your laptop would be backed-up off-site. On a cloud, or something.'

'Yes, off course, but they can get to it if they can break the security on my laptop.'

'But you left it there for them to take,' said Ford. 'You used us as a way to leak your address. You made it look casual, almost like a mistake, but you led them to your caravan, and you left your computer there. You wanted them to take it.'

'It was a long shot, but since I was already burned, I took it.'

'What happens when they start up those computers?'

'If my luck holds, then they'll connect it to the computer network at the Penglai Island Hotel, and it will launch a virus into the system that will give me access.'

'A Trojan Horse?'

'Exactly. Even if they use a standalone computer to try and crack my encryption, it will get infected and spread, and hopefully eventually someone will connect to the system and then I'm in.'

'And what are you looking for?'

'To infiltrate, obfuscate, exfiltrate, eviscerate. I'm still after Zhou.'

'I would have thought if you sat still long enough he'll come to you.'

'I want to take the game to him.'

'This is more than just some bullshit political mischief, you've got a hardon for Zhou.'

'When Zhou was chief of police he organised a crack-down on dissent groups in Guangzhou. I got picked up in their sweep. He questioned me for two days, personally. He smashed my kneecaps with a ball peen hammer.'

‘Did you give up your friends?’ asked Kavanagh. ‘That why there are three of your Eight Immortals dead?’

Iron Crutch shook his head. ‘I can’t give anyone up, because I don’t know who they are. That’s the importance of using an alias, and masking your address, and moving on.’

‘You’re leaving? Going to plan the revolution from a different caravan?’

‘They’ve already had a revolution in the People’s Republic. Dissidents like me are called counter-revolutionary. I’m just chipping away at the edges. Gradual pluralisation is my goal now.’

‘So why are you talking to us?’

Iron Crutch shook his head: ‘That’s not the important question. You need to ask: why were you looking for me?’

‘Is that some more inscrutable Daoist bullshit?’ said Kavanagh. ‘Flip the question around. One hand clapping?’

‘We found you when we were looking for Alannah,’ said Ford.

‘And you went to her because you want to know who killed your wife.’

‘I know who that is now.’

‘And what will you do when you get close to him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What about your friend with the gun in her pants? What will she do?’

Kavanagh took the gun from her pocket, turning her body to keep it out of sight of the people on the path and pointed it down at the man in the wheelchair. ‘If you’ve got no kneecaps, maybe I’ll pop a couple in your elbows. Make sure you never play the violin again.’

Iron Crutch pulled aside the blanket and showed her the automatic pistol lying in his lap.

Kavanagh retreated a step. ‘What is that thing, a Luger?’



‘No,’ said the hacker. ‘It’s a Walther P38.’

‘Did you kill a member of the Gestapo?’

‘Not quite. The best place to get an illegal handgun around here is from the neo-Nazis. They worship this thing. You just have to know how to find them on the net.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought they’d sell it to an Asian,’ said Kavanagh.

‘Not everyone in the cult is Chinese. I’ve got a *gweilo* friend who’s blonder than you and has a head so square he can pass as an Aryan. He did the deal.’

Kavanagh put the gun back in her pocket. Iron Crutch was smiling. ‘I looked at your record,’ he said. ‘Kalgoorlie and Marble Bar. Have you noticed that the people that cross your path end up dead?’

‘I’ve noticed a few bodies along the way,’ said Kavanagh. ‘I’m just glad none of them were us.’

‘And none of them are me,’ said Iron Crutch ‘I’m intent on not being road-kill in your path.’

‘But you’re hoping that we kill Zhou for you.’

‘I can’t get to him,’ said Iron Crutch, ‘but maybe you can. I can get you into the secure floors at the top of the hotel. I can get you close to Zhou.’ He reached inside the top pocket of his jacket and pulled out a cheap red prepaid phone, so small and shiny it looked like a toy, and he laid it on the wall.

‘This is a burner,’ he said. ‘There is one number in the memory, which is mine, and I can burn my phone too. If you need help when you get to the hotel, call me. This is the last time you’ll see me.’

‘You’re disappearing?’ asked Ford.

‘I had a dog once,’ he said. ‘He taught me an important lesson. No matter what life brings you, sometimes you’ve got to kick some grass over that shit and move on.’

He backed the wheelchair away from the wall, spun on his wheels and started off up the path between the pines towards the hotel.

‘Are we going to let him go?’ said Ford.

Kavanagh watched the wheelchair go into the shadow cast by the hotel and then through the sliding doors into the foyer. ‘He’s just a deluded fantasist,’ she said. ‘Some sad shut-in believing he’s giving it to the man from his keyboard.’

‘You reckon he’s going to help us?’

She opened her mouth to speak, but then she stopped, looking over Ford’s shoulder, her mouth still open. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I reckon he’s set us up again.’

Ford turned around to see where she was looking. Two men were walking towards them at speed, maybe thirty metres away, wearing hoodies that shaded their faces, jeans and running shoes. When they saw Kavanagh looking at them they separated, closing the gap between them. Ford looked across the car park, thinking about running towards the hotel, but they were trapped in the right angle of the wall, the men blocking any escape. He looked over the edge of the wall, saw the drop of five metres to dunes below and thought about making the jump, but Kavanagh put her hand on his arm. She’d pulled the gun from her pocket, keeping it low by her side, hidden from everyone but showing enough of it to the two men for them to stop walking towards them. They raised their palms to her, hunched their shoulders and took a step backwards, then held their hands out wide, letting her know that they would not be letting her leave. One of them put a phone to his ear and spoke into it, and the four of them stood looking at each other until Ford saw the car approaching.

It was a white Bentley, a new Flying Spur, its windows tinted black, its engine purring gently as it came down the cycle path, slowly enough for the cyclists and walkers on the path to get out of its way. They stepped aside and watched it pass them

with awe, as if not daring to question why it was off the road. Kavanagh put the gun back in her pocket and looked at Ford, and he shrugged.

The car came to a stop on the grass between the two men in hoodies, and the man on the passenger side went to open the rear door. The man that stepped out was huge, Ford guessed he was well over two metres. He wore a white tunic that hung past his waist, epaulettes enhancing his broad shoulders, silver buttons up the front to a high collar, which was mostly hidden behind a thick black beard. His head was covered in a white turban worn tight and neat. He looked at Kavanagh and then at Ford from under heavy eyebrows and then bowed his head slightly.

‘My name is Singh,’ he said. ‘I apologise if my men startled you.’ He made a gently wave of his hand and his men took a few steps backwards. Singh’s accent was cut-glass English, with only the slightest hint of something exotic behind it. Ford couldn’t place it, but he knew it wasn’t Indian.

‘Miss Sofia Lau would like to invite you to join her for lunch,’ said Singh. ‘If you’d care to get in the car I will take you to meet her.’

Ford looked over the wall again, but still didn’t like the drop, and then he’d be running in sand. He looked up and down the beach. People had stopped to watch the car, and were now watching this scene playing out. Kavanagh had her hand out of her pocket, the gun in plain sight now. There was a gasp from somewhere, one of the people on the footpath behind them. Ford watched a cyclist reaching for his phone. Singh saw the gun and bowed again. ‘There is no need for that,’ he said. ‘If you feel insecure then please bring that with you, but I can personally guarantee your safety. I recommend we leave quickly. I am sure someone will have phoned the police.’

Kavanagh’s shoulders dropped, she put the gun back in her pocket and let the air out of her lungs in a long hiss. She looked at Ford and nodded, then walked towards the car. Singh stepped back and held the door open for her and she got in. Ford thought for

a moment, the man in the turban smiling at him, then he followed Kavanagh to the car. 'Nice uniform,' he said to Singh. 'The last guy I saw dressed up like that was the doorman at the Raffles in Singapore.'

'That might have been me, sir,' said Singh as he closed the door.

Ford slumped backwards into the soft leather of the back seat as Singh took his seat in the front next to the driver. As he looked at Kavanagh he heard the soft click as the doors locked.

**13.**

Ford looked at Kavanagh only twice during the drive into the city. The first time she had her eyes fixed on the back of Singh's head as if studying the material of his turban, looking for a flaw. Singh didn't speak, either to them or the man beside him. The driver had only turned to them once when they had first sat down, giving them the once-over with narrow eyes that appeared Chinese, but his skin was as dark as Singh's, with a glow to it like burnished copper. His hair was short in a buzz cut, and he wore a black tunic similar to Singh's, sitting upright behind the wheel with the same military bearing. Now he watched the road ahead, and Singh did too, as they were gliding through the suburbs.

When they joined the freeway, Ford could see the high-rise buildings of the city framed in the windscreen. He let himself slide backwards into the soft leather of the Bentley's seat and closed his eyes, listening to the low purr of the engine, feeling the cool breeze from the air-conditioner caress his face. He didn't know what would come next, and he didn't want to think about what had made him get in the car, so he took a deep breath and tried to stay in the moment. He found himself wondering whether the car had a drinks cabinet somewhere.

He opened his eyes and saw the polished walnut panel in the centre console, and when he touched the wood it slid down to reveal a small decanter and a pair of glasses. He lifted the decanter and pulled the stopper and inhaled, enjoying the soft peat and seaweed smell of an old Islay malt. This was the second time he looked at Kavanagh, and her eyes met his with a look of contempt before she returned her attention to Singh, shifting her weight in her seat and fidgeting in her pocket, her hand still on the gun.

The freeway ducked through the city, passing between the office towers, and then they were sweeping down the off-ramp with the river opening out in front of them,

mirror smooth, reflecting the clear blue sky overhead. Ford poured himself a whisky and sat back, gazing first at the river and then at the city skyline, the shadows of palm trees dappling the car as they cruised along Riverside Drive.

The car slowed and turned left, the engine note rising by a semi-tone as it climbed the rise onto the low ridge on which the city sat. As they crested the slope the Bentley pulled into a semi-circular driveway in front of a large modern hotel, a tall building of pure white stone and frosted glass. Ford didn't recall ever noticing the building before, or remember even reading about it. He thought there might always have been a hotel on this site, but it would have been a stark brutalist slab of sixties concrete. He looked up at the white façade and figured it may have been refurbished and reclad, but it had been a while since he had been at this end of Adelaide Terrace among all the hotels. As he finished his whisky and returned the glass to the cabinet he heard the soft click as the doors unlocked. Singh and the driver got out and opened the rear doors, Singh offering his hand to Kavanagh. She eyed it suspiciously, not used to old-fashioned manners, but Singh kept his hand steady, his eyes downcast in deference, a look of infinite patience on his face, and eventually she took his hand and stepped out of the car.

The driveway was covered with a graceful curved roof that swept out from the hotel. Ford stepped out of the shade and looked up at the building, a gleaming monolith that climbed twenty storeys above him, featureless except for the perfect grid pattern of joints between stone and glass. It reflected the harsh Perth sunlight, forcing Ford to squint and then cover his eyes with his hand. The name of the hotel was picked out in subtle silver lettering embedded in the stone above the entrance: The Penglai Island Hotel.

'The police won't have much trouble finding this car,' he said.

'It is registered to the hotel,' said Singh. 'The police will not come here.'

The frosted glass doors opened with a swish and two men stepped out, dressed identically to the driver in black tunics, their skin the same shade, their eyes narrow and expressionless. They took up positions either side of the door, their feet planted wide apart and their hands clasped behind their backs. Singh walked between them and turned on the threshold, bowing to them, beckoning them inside with a wide theatrical sweep of his arm. 'Welcome,' he said.

Ford looked over his shoulder. The driver was three steps behind him, guarding against any last-minute change of heart. Kavanagh stepped towards the door, looking at Singh and each of his men in turn.

Ford followed her, and as he passed Singh he said, 'Not Chinese?'

Singh nodded. 'I am Punjabi, sir.'

'Not you,' said Ford. 'Your henchmen here.'

Singh smiled. 'They are Nepali, sir. Former 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Gurkha Rifles.'

The men at the door looked at him as if in acknowledgement and Ford smiled at them, trying to look relaxed. As he passed through the doors the two Gurkhas turned and fell in beside Singh, following Ford and Kavanagh into the foyer of the hotel.

The interior was as bright, minimal and modern as the outside, a study in white. The marble floor led across the foyer to a low white counter devoid of ornamentation. Two staff were standing behind it, in the same uniform as Singh's men, wearing fixed smiles as Ford approached. The rest of the foyer was given over to austere white couches and armchairs facing each other across bleached wooden coffee tables. There was no sign of any other staff or guests. Piano music wafted through the foyer, Chopin perhaps, and it seemed to Ford that someone was playing it live. He looked around but could see only empty furniture.

Singh walked briskly past Ford and said, 'If you would like to follow me,' and led them past the desk towards a corridor of lifts. The clerks behind the desk nodded almost imperceptibly as they passed. Singh ignored the bank of lifts and took them to an unmarked door at the end of the corridor. He pressed a security card to a blank panel beside the door and it opened to reveal a private lift. Singh waved them inside and stepped in after them, followed by both of his men. They turned their backs to Ford and Kavanagh as Singh put his card to the panel and pressed the third of four unmarked white buttons. Ford looked above Singh's head at the lights over the door. There were only four, marked from P1 to P4. He felt the pressure on his feet increase as the lift accelerated silently upwards, but it was some time before the first of the lights illuminated, and he realised the lift only served the four penthouse floors at the top of the hotel.

The same Chopin was playing in the lift, but it did nothing to calm Kavanagh. She was edgy, bouncing on the balls of her feet, her eyes flicking from man to man, opening her hands and splaying her fingers before clenching them into fists. Ford took hold of her hand and held it firmly, the only way he could think of calming her, but she snatched it away, thrusting it into the pocket of her jacket, looking for the comfort of her gun.

The lift slowed and then chimed as the doors opened. Singh and his men stepped out, moved to the far side of the lobby and turned to face them. Kavanagh hesitated, and looked at the lift buttons, then she shrugged as if to herself and stepped out of the lift without looking at Ford. He followed her and found himself in a plain white corridor, the only light coming from a recessed light fitting outside the lift. There was a small service door opposite the lift marked as a fire escape, and the corridor stretched left and right, leading to a single heavy panelled white door at each end. Between the



lift and the door on the left was a rectangular white arch. A tray sat on a small white table next to it.

Singh bowed his head and said, 'I regret that you cannot take your weapon beyond this point. We have metal detectors throughout the penthouse suites.' He held out both his hands, palm upwards, like a supplicant. Kavanagh took her hand out of her pocket and was holding the little Smith and Wesson, its snub nose pointed at Singh's gut. 'You said I could hold on to it if I wanted to feel safe.'

'That was in the car,' said Singh. 'I had hoped we had established some trust by now. You are quite safe here in the hotel.' He still had his hands out, holding them rock still, and he bowed his head just an inch lower towards her.

Ford saw Kavanagh's eyes move, looking over Singh's shoulder and measuring the distance to the fire escape.

She should not have taken her eyes off Singh. His hands darted forward towards her, his left grabbing her hand around the gun and pushing it down and his right jabbing at her wrist, the tips of his fingers hitting the tendons and forcing her to release her grip. By the time Kavanagh reacted it was over, Singh returning to his earlier position, his palms now pressed together, the gun between them, entirely hidden by his vast hands.

'I am sorry that I had to use force,' he said. 'But you should never point a small calibre gun at a large calibre man.' He looked at her to see if the joke had broken the ice. She was rubbing her wrist, a small smile twisting her mouth. 'That's some slick *kung fu* shit you've got there, big fella.'

'That was *bhujya-yuddha*,' said Singh, 'an ancient Sikh discipline. The Chinese are not the only culture with martial arts.' He handed the gun to one of the Gurkhas and held out his hands again. 'I will also need to take your telephones and keys.'

Ford shrugged and handed the Gurkha his phone, keys and his Zippo lighter. Singh looked at Kavanagh, who hesitated before reaching in her pocket for her phone and keys.

‘My motorcycle is still parked at the beach,’ she said.

‘I will have it brought to the hotel,’ said Singh.

‘Tell your boys not to fuck with it. I’ll know if it’s been ridden hard.’

Singh nodded solemnly and waved for her to step through the metal detector. It beeped as she went through, a small red light winking at the top of the arch, and Singh beckoned for her to step back towards him. ‘I will need to frisk you,’ he said.

Kavanagh lifted her jacket and showed him her bare belly and the heavy belt buckle in her jeans. She lifted her arms and Singh had to stoop to pat her down, running his hands down each side of her torso and down her legs. He nodded and she stepped through the arch and the red light blinked again. Singh looked at Kavanagh for a second and then waved Ford through. When he passed through without tripping the detector, Singh went through after him, walking past them to lead them down the corridor to the large door at the end. He waited at the door, his hand on the broad steel knob, and when Ford and Kavanagh caught up with him he put a finger to his lips, turned the handle softly and opened the door.

The piano music got louder when Ford stepped into the room, Singh holding the door for them, his fingers still to his lips.

After the gloom of the corridor the space they entered was full of light. It poured through windows on three sides, the room so big it took up the whole end of the building. Ford squinted, and as his eyes accustomed to the brightness the view beyond the windows resolved itself, the river wide in front of them and snaking away to the west where the late afternoon sun was reflecting off the water. The interior of the room was as pure and white as the rest of the hotel: plain marble floor, low white couches,

blond wood tables. A wide fireplace took up one of the side walls, and leaning against it was a tall, slender Chinese man. Ford guessed he was in his early twenties, his skin smooth and unblemished, stretched taut over high cheekbones. His black hair was long, falling in front of elegant almond eyes. He turned to look at them, sweeping his hair away from his face with his hand and then putting a finger to his lips. He wore a loose open-necked shirt in raw linen, and matching baggy drawstring pants that hung loosely from his narrow hips. Ford noticed he was barefoot and wondered if the clothes were pyjamas of some kind.

The music was coming from a grand piano, white like everything else, set up at the far end of the room. The same music they had heard in the foyer and the lift, now filling the room. Ford had not seen it at first, lost in the glare from the windows. The woman playing was as beautiful as the man by the fireplace: tall and willowy, the same high cheekbones and delicate eyes, her jet black hair cut in a sharp French bob, the fringe perfectly parallel to her heavy eyebrows, which were plucked so straight Ford wondered whether they'd used a ruler. Her eyes were closed, her head swaying with the music. She played the last few bars and let the notes ring out, a delicate bare foot holding down the sustain pedal. When the music had finally dissipated she took her hands from the keyboard, her foot off the pedal, and slowly opened her eyes, staring into the middle distance, oblivious to everyone in the room. She raised a hand to a small control box on the lid of the piano, flicked a switch, then took a deep breath.

'Chopin?' asked Ford.

The slightest crease appeared in the pianist's eyebrows, ruining their symmetry, and she closed her eyes again.

'Scarlatti,' said the man by the fireplace. 'Sonata in G Major.' His English was perfect, but with the hint of an accent that Ford could not place, but which betrayed a European education.

He stepped towards them, extending a hand towards Ford, smiling to show teeth as perfect and white as everything else. 'I am Paulo Lau,' he said, 'and this is my sister Sofia. Welcome to Penglai Island.'

Ford shook Paulo's hand and then turned to look at Kavanagh. She was still by the door with Singh, showing no interest in Paulo, her eyes intent on his sister as she stood up from the piano. She was wearing a long gown, of the same raw linen as her brother's pyjamas, the neck open wide to show an expanse of white skin, her chest completely flat with no curve to it at all. With the light around her she looked luminous. She walked slowly towards them, placing one foot carefully in front of the other, her hands hanging limp by her side. It might have been a strut learned on the catwalk except it was too lithe, like a dancer. She stopped in front of Ford and extended her hand, the fingers pointing down, the curve of her wrist presented to him. He didn't know whether she expected him to shake her hand or kiss it, and he found himself just staring at how long her fingers were, the nails cut short and polished, the skin as pale as the marble around her. Sofia held it there until he made the decision to take her hand lightly in his and bow his head as he had seen Singh done and as soon as he did it he felt the absurdity of it. He let go and looked at her face, her eyes as dark as her hair. The only colour on her whole body was a bloom of red lipstick on her small, plump lips.

'Please sit down,' she said, waving her hand towards the two couches in front of the fireplace, separated by a low coffee table. She bent her knees and perched on the edge of one, her back upright, her hands folded precisely in her lap.

Ford looked at the white couch and then down at his own clothes, grubby from two days' wear. He thought about remaining standing, but Sofia was looking at him impatiently, so he risked leaving a smudge on the couch and sat down.

Kavanagh looked at Sofia like she was some exotic creature seen in captivity for the first time, and after deciding that the beast was most likely harmless, she sat beside Ford.

Paulo moved to the end of the couch and stood beside his sister, resting a hand gently on her shoulder as if posing for a portrait. 'You'll have to excuse us,' he said. 'We only flew in from Macau the day before yesterday. Such a long trip, and we are a little jaded. Long haul flights are such a bore, don't you think?'

'I wouldn't know,' said Kavanagh. 'I've never been out of the country.'

'How dreadful for you,' said Paulo, his face in a pantomime frown. 'We've not been awake long, and we were going to have some tea. You simply must join us.'

'Do we have a choice?' said Kavanagh.

Paulo opened his mouth into a round oval of mock horror. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'You must forgive us. It must seem frightfully rude of us, bringing you here like that. You must feel like you've been kidnapped. We did ask Mr Singh to extend you every courtesy and to make it clear to you that this was an invitation.'

Kavanagh gave him her own version of his pantomime scowl. 'So we are free to leave?'

'We brought you here for your own safety,' said Paulo. 'Our suite is the safest place for you. The men who are looking for you may find you again.'

'You know who they are?'

'Yes, they work for our brother.'

'Half-brother,' said Sofia, the first words she had spoken, her voice low and reedy, with the same clipped middle-European accent as her brother.

'The man after us, his name is Zhou. What does he do for your brother?' asked Ford.

Paulo waved a dismissive hand in the air. 'He used to be a policeman. Now he is acting as some sort of *kuli* for Robert. Bodyguard and fixer and errand boy.'

'Must we talk of such beastly things before we have enjoyed our tea?' said Sofia. 'We would be very bad hosts if we allowed such uncivilized behaviour.'

Singh appeared carrying a bamboo tray crowded with teapots and cups. He set it down on the table in front of Sofia, bowed his head and retreated slowly.

Sofia looked over the tray, inspecting in turn the black iron kettle, red teapot, caddy, pitcher and four small tea cups. Each cup had a smaller cup inside it, narrower and taller. When she was satisfied that everything was in order, she opened the caddy and spooned a measure of tea into the pot and filled it from the kettle. She then closed her eyes and sat perfectly still, letting the tea steep. The silence made Ford nervous, feeling he should say something, and when he looked at Kavanagh he could see that she was still twitchy.

After a minute Sofia opened her eyes and poured the tea through a strainer into the pitcher. She filled each cup in turn from the pitcher, then upturned each cup over the teapot, the pale tea sloshing over the red clay of the teapot and collecting in the tray. She poured the remnants of the tea pitcher over the teapot and set it back down on the tray. Ford looked at her, puzzled.

*'Hang yun liu shui,'* said Sofia, under her breath, as if in answer to Ford's silent query. *'This means 'a row of clouds running water'.* She refilled the teapot with hot water, holding the kettle high, a long stream falling into the pot and swirling the leaves. *'We do not drink the first brew,'* she said. *'It is only to rinse the leaves and awaken them, and to warm the pot. This second pouring is zai zhu qing xuan, 'direct again the pure spring', and is to coax the flavour out of the leaves.'*

She fussed with the teapot, using the lid to knock the bubbles from the surface of the tea and scrape loose leaves from the rim. *'This Yixang teapot is from our mother's collection. She has pots of great antiquity and value, some from as far back as the Ming Dynasty. This one, however, is exquisite, but of only modest value.'*

Ford looked at the plain, unglazed red teapot, bare of any ornamentation, and found it hard to see how anything so dull could have any value. Sofia was enjoying giving her lesson.

‘Because the pot has no glaze, it absorbs the flavours and tannins from the tea, and over many generations can acquire a patina that adds to its value. It imparts these flavours back into the tea as it brews. One must therefore be careful to use only one type of tea with the pot.’

She lifted her eyes and looked at Kavanagh, her eyes travelling from her boots to her hair, a careful examination and appraisal, taking so long that Kavanagh was forced to look away.

‘Do you know the goddess Guanyin?’ Sofia asked, waving her hand towards the fireplace. Kavanagh and Ford both turned to look where she was pointing. On the mantelpiece was a small statue, no more than a foot tall, made from white glazed porcelain. It depicted a graceful Chinese woman with a serene face, her hand raised in blessing. ‘This oolong tea is named for Guanyin,’ said Sofia. ‘The Goddess of Compassion.’ She lifted the teapot now and poured it into the pitcher.

‘The story goes that a poor devout farmer repaired a rundown temple in Fujian that held an iron statue of Guanyin,’ said Sofia. ‘The goddess appeared in a dream to him to offer the farmer her thanks, and told him of a cave behind the temple where a great treasure awaited, which he must share with others. He found a single tea shoot, which he tended and nurtured until it grew into a bush that produced the finest tea. This tea is descended from that first bush.’

Kavanagh was looking bored by the theatre that Sofia was performing for her. ‘Is Alannah Doyle being held in this hotel?’ she asked, not even trying to hide her impatience.

‘Please,’ said Sofia, ‘the tea ceremony is a time for contemplation. We should not talk of worldly things.’

‘Oh, I’ve got plenty to contemplate right now,’ said Kavanagh. She waited for a response but Sofia was busy pouring the tea into the small cups.

‘These are snifter cups,’ she said. ‘They allow you to enjoy the aroma of the tea. This is called *long feng cheng xiang* which means ‘*the dragon and phoenix in auspicious union.*’ She placed a teacup over the top of the smaller snifter and inverted the cups, delicately releasing the tea into the drinking cups. She put a cup in the palm of her hand and presented it to Kavanagh.

Kavanagh looked at the cup suspiciously, then at Sofia and her brother, and decided to play along. She took the cup and sipped from it. Sofia offered a cup to Ford and he raised it to his mouth. The only experience he had with tea was from a dim sum house on Beaufort Street: jasmine tea in a bag from a steel teapot slammed onto the table by a busy waitress. This was something different: sweet and fragrant, the flavour lingering in his mouth.

Paulo sat down next to his sister and Sofia passed him a cup, then raised her own snifter cup to her nose and inhaled deeply, the look on her face as serene and beautiful as the statue over the fireplace.

Kavanagh slurped the last of her tea, swilling it around her mouth, her cheeks bulging. She dropped the cup back on the tray. ‘Is Alan McCann in this hotel?’

‘Yes,’ said Sofia, and sighed. ‘He is on the floor below us, in one of the penthouse guest rooms. He is staying there with his daughter Ellen. They are guests of my half-brother, Robert.’

Ford could recall having seen McCann’s daughter only twice. The first time had been at Kalgoorlie Races, the day after the Gwardar robbery, and he remembered her as a thin, pale woman with lank bleached hair and arms crowded with tattoos and track



marks. The second time has been at the airport as she left for Macau with her father and Ford's wife, and his daughter. She'd been hanging out with bikies and got herself strung out on meth and then heroin. McCann had intervened, just one thread in the spider's web he had spun around the robbery; the web that had trapped Ford.

'And where is Robert?' asked Ford.

'He has a suite on the floor above this one. He shares it with his mother, Patti.'

'Our father's first wife,' added Paulo, causing his sister to wrinkle her nose and frown, as if the tea had suddenly turned bitter.

'And is Alannah Doyle in this hotel?'

Paulo hesitated before he said: 'I'm sorry but I don't know.'

Ford could see Kavanagh scrunching her fingers into fists. 'This is your idea of safe? Locking us in the same hotel as McCann and your brother's goons?'

'They would not do anything here that might disgrace the family, and besides, the security here is of the highest order.' Ford looked over his shoulder at Singh, stood between them and the door, and outside it were the two Gurkhas in the lobby.

'So why are you here?' Kavanagh asked again, leaning forward on the sofa, glad that the pleasantries were over and that she might get some answers.

Sofia looked at her brother before she said, 'We were summoned here by our father. The whole family is gathering.'

'You didn't say who lives on the top floor,' said Kavanagh. 'That would be your father and mother?'

'Our father is here, yes,' said Paulo. 'But not our mother. She will come later, at the last minute. She generally avoids any place where there is a risk of having to deal with our father's first wife, or his eldest son.'

'Family, huh?' said Ford.

Sofia looked at him stone-faced, and then stood up. 'This is starting to feel like an interrogation,' she said. 'It has become terribly boring.'

Paulo stood up next to her and held her hand, and together they walked towards the back of the room. There was a door each side of the one through which they had entered, and Ford presumed that they led to bedrooms.

'We really must freshen up and get dressed,' he said, turning to them. 'We would love you to join us for something to eat later. Dinner, is it, or perhaps a late lunch. I'm all of a muddle. We have prepared rooms for you on this floor, and a change of clothes. We can talk then.'

He leaned over towards his sister and whispered something in her ear and she giggled, and then opened the door and left the room.

Ford stood up before Paulo could follow her. 'You said your mother would be arriving just in time,' he said. 'Just in time for what?'

'For the wedding, of course,' said Paulo. 'Robert will be marrying Ellen on Saturday.' And with that, he disappeared, the door closing silently behind him.

**14.**

Kavanagh and Ford followed Singh back down the corridor towards the door at the opposite end from the twins' suite. The two Gurkhas were sitting on chairs by the lift and when Kavanagh set off the metal detector they both jumped up and stood ready, looking sheepishly at Singh. Their boss gave them a tiny dismissive wave with his fingers and they sat back down again. Singh reached the door and placed his security card against the panel, then opened the door. He stepped inside and held it for them.

The living room they entered was the mirror to the one they had just left, but smaller. It stretched the full width of the building, but only half the depth. Its windows looked out on the eastern end of the city, a jumble of non-descript medium-rise office blocks and apartment buildings with the freeway and railway passing behind them. The windows to the west looked towards the city centre, and out of the east side Ford could see the light towers of the cricket ground.

Singh closed the front door and stepped sideway to one of the doors leading to the bedrooms. He opened it and gestured for them to follow him inside into a large room with a huge double bed and an en-suite bathroom leading off the back. 'There are two bedrooms in this suite,' he said. He opened a wardrobe to show a row of hangers with white shirts, pants and simple cream dresses. 'Each room has fresh clothes in a range of sizes for men and women. Fitted clothes will be sent up later now that I know your size.'

Ford watched Singh's eyes move over Kavanagh again, from head to toe and back again. 'You're a tailor as well as a butler?' he asked.

'I cannot sew,' said Singh, 'but I can estimate a woman to within one dress size.'

Kavanagh waited until he'd stopped looking and his eyes returned to her face before she said, 'How long are you intending keeping us here?'

'It's not for me to say,' said Singh, closing the wardrobe. 'You are our guests, and you are welcome to stay as long as you wish.'

'Never a straight answer, eh?'

Singh gave her a smile with his eyes. 'There are two worlds in Chinese society,' he said. 'What is shown on the surface, the face; and what truly happens, the essence of things. You must never suggest that the second world exists, especially not to the twins.'

'Which of the twins is the older?' asked Ford.

'I believe Miss Sofia,' said Singh. 'By thirty minutes.'

'And Paulo has been trying to catch up ever since?' said Ford.

Singh did not answer, he simply bowed and said, 'Perhaps you would like to freshen up and put on some clean clothes and I will come and get you for dinner in one hour.' He left the room and Ford heard the front door close. Ford went out into the living room, put his eye to the peephole in the front door, and watched Singh walk down the corridor to where the Gurkhas sat. They jumped up to attention and he gave them a couple of quiet instructions that they acknowledged with brisk nods, then Singh used his security card to call the lift. Ford tried the door but it was locked.

'We seem to be in a five star prison,' he said.

'The rich people make their lives look so fucking good that we all break our balls trying to get the same thing,' said Kavanagh, looking around the room.

'Are you saying you envy them?'

'Would you want this life? Cut off from everything? Not knowing anything that's going on outside their walled-in life?'

She was pacing a lap of the living room now, inspecting the furniture and fittings. 'We can only exit by the lift, which is key-carded, and the fire escape,' she said.

‘And that’s still being guarded by two soldiers,’ said Ford. His eyes followed Kavanagh around the room, looking at what she was looking at. ‘There’s no phone and no TV in here,’ he said. ‘There had better be a fucking mini-bar or I’ll be calling for room service.’

Kavanagh took off her leather jacket and hung it over the back of one of the chairs beside the dining table. She tilted her head at Ford to tell him to follow. She went into the bathroom and waved for him to join her. When he came in she had turned on the shower and was unbelting her jeans.

‘How long have you been waiting to get me alone?’ said Ford.

She raised an eyebrow at him. ‘Kiss my arse,’ she said.

‘Do we have time?’ said Ford. ‘And don’t look at me as if I haven’t done it before.’

She rolled her eyes, unzipped her jeans and opened them. She thrust her hand inside her panties and when she pulled it out she was holding the small phone that Iron Crutch had given them.

‘Is that what set off the metal detector?’ asked Ford.

‘You have no idea how uncomfortable that is,’ said Kavanagh. ‘But I’ve never met a guy who will frisk me there.’

‘You’re lucky Singh didn’t notice the bulge in your crotch,’ said Ford. ‘Or maybe he did and thought you had a cock.’

‘Wouldn’t be the first time someone thought that,’ said Kavanagh, thumbing the keypad on the phone and squinting at the tiny screen. ‘There are CCTV cameras in the main room and the bedrooms, but I think we’re alright in here.’

‘You’re texting Iron Crutch?’

‘I’m telling him what I’m going to do to him for selling us out to the Lau family. Hellfire and brimstone on him and his first-born.’

The phone buzzed and Ford smiled. 'You had it set to vibrate when it was down there?'

'Doesn't every girl?' said Kavanagh, reading the message that had arrived. She held it up for Ford to read. It said: *'I told you I could get you inside the hotel.'*

Ford was smiling. 'So he's still on our side?'

'There are no sides,' said Kavanagh. 'There are only people who can help us, and people who can't. Just now he's someone we can use. I need him to hack into the security of this place, help me look for Allannah.'

Ford thought about that and said, 'Is that what I am too? Someone useful to you until you get what you want?'

She didn't look up, still busy with the screen. 'Get over yourself,' she said.

'And what about the twins? Are they useful to us?'

Kavanagh pushed down her jeans and kicked them off. 'We've got no choice but to tag along with their little game and see how it plays out. McCann has manoeuvred his daughter into this marriage with Robert Lau, or perhaps it's the other way around. Either way, it's to cement their business relationship. McCann needs Lau to re-float his business. Lau wants to get his hands on McCann's iron ore assets, but maybe there's something else going on. Whatever it is, the twins don't like it and are going to use us to mess it up.'

'Well, that's just fine with me,' said Ford, watching as Kavanagh grabbed the hem of her shirt and started to pull it off. She caught him looking.

'You can leave now,' she said.

Ford looked in her eyes to gauge how serious she was and her expression made him turn around and leave the bathroom.

He went out into the living room and crossed to a where a low credenza ran along the wall. He opened the first door and found the fridge and then lifted the top and

found the bar. He took a cold beer from the fridge and popped the top, took a long pull on it and walked to the window. He opened the sliding door and stepped out onto the balcony. The sound of traffic reached him from the street below. He leaned over the rail and looked down on Adelaide Terrace. Traffic was backed up travelling out of the city, cars weaving around buses. Office workers stood in orderly lines at the bus stops, everybody heading home, out across the freeway and over the causeway to where the suburbs stretched to the horizon.

Ford found his cigarettes, put one in his mouth and patted his pockets, looking for his lighter. He remembered handing it to the Gurkha in the hallway and cursed under his breath. He went back to the bar and started opening drawers. In the second he found an ashtray and a box of long cigar matches with the logo of the Penglai Island Casino in Macau. Next to the ashtray was a box of playing cards marked with the same logo. He stuck the cards in his pocket and took the ashtray out onto the balcony, lit his cigarette and drank his beer, staring out over the city, watching the stream of traffic crawl along the freeway and the trains drag the commuters back to their homes. The high-rise towers of the city looked close enough that he felt he could reach out and touch them, but he knew he could not. So near, but he was trapped in the twins' ivory tower, their private island floating above the city, aloof and cloistered from the small lives of the people below him. He liked it. He enjoyed the separation. After years spent on the mines in remote camps in the desert, he knew that the city was a far lonelier place than the bush. Here he was, at home but feeling like a tourist.

He finished the beer and stubbed out his cigarette and went inside. He could hear the water still running in Kavanagh's room so he went to the other bedroom and kicked off his shoes. The furniture was white on a white tiled floor, the bedding and the window blinds all white. He pushed down his dirty pants, stripped off his shirt and underwear and left them in a heap, then stepped into the bathroom.

He was showered and shaved and fully dressed in a pair of white cotton pants and a white linen shirt, but Kavanagh still hadn't come out of her room. He looked again in the bar and found that everything he needed was there. He picked up bottles of gin, vermouth and Campari and carried them to the table. He found an insulated bucket of ice on the credenza, a bottle of soda water in the fridge, and plucked an orange from the fruit bowl. He needed a knife, and searched in the drawer by the bar. He found a corkscrew, which had no foil cutter, then found a small fruit knife with a black blade. He picked out two highball glasses and laid all these things out on the table. Now he was ready. He filled the glasses with ice, added the spirits and then topped it up with soda. He used the knife to pare a twist of orange peel from the fruit, the little black knife slicing through the skin effortlessly and into his thumb. He cursed and watched the blood bubble from the cut. He licked off the blood and put an orange twist in each glass and then stirred them both. He took a long drink from one glass and sighed aloud: the perfect Negroni.

He sat down at the table now, his drink by his elbow, and broke the seal on the pack of playing cards. He sucked at his thumb until the bleeding had stopped, then he shuffled the cards, riffled them, and fanned them out on the table. He picked up the end card and flipped over the fan of cards. It was a standard deck of Bicycle brand cards, except that the ace of spades had the name of the casino scrolled across the face. The backs were red, with a geometric black pattern that resembled Chinese lacquer work, with the name of the Penglai Island Casino Macau printed in the same discreet modernist typeface he had seen over the entrance to the hotel.

He gathered the cards, riffled them again, and dealt himself a hand of solitaire. He was half way to completing it when Kavanagh came out of the room. She was wearing the same shirt and pants as Ford, and a pair of plain canvas espadrilles. The clothes hung loose on her, and Ford saw that she had rolled the legs of her pants up.



'There were some girl clothes in the wardrobe,' she said. 'The same sort of gauzy shapeless sackcloth that the sister was wearing. I prefer the boys clothes.'

'Now we look like twins too,' said Ford, looking down at his own outfit. 'I always thought you were like a sister. You break things and then blame me.'

She smiled at that, a natural open smile that told him she had forgotten the situation they were in, if only for a few minutes. She looked at the cocktail on the table next to his hand, saw the drink waiting for her, and picked it up. She drank from it and smiled. 'The ice has melted in this,' she said, 'but it's good.'

'You took your time in the shower,' said Ford, gathering up the cards.

Kavanagh took another drink and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. 'I've never stayed in a hotel like this before. All the little shampoo bottles and fancy beauty products on the shelf, nice fluffy white towels. That shower rose is huge. There was no hurry.'

Ford could smell the fresh scent of soap on her. Her skin was flushed and pink and her wet hair was sticking up in spikes. She took another slug of the cocktail and looked over the glass at him. He went back to gathering the cards.

He found three queens and stacked them on the top of the deck, then collected four aces and put them on the bottom. He did a false shuffle and then dealt five cards to each of them, giving her the three queens and dealing himself the aces off the bottom. He watched her to see if she had noticed his crooked deal, but she was looking at the logo on the back of the cards.

'What are we playing?' she asked.

'Draw poker,' said Ford.

'And you reckon you're a bit of a shark?'

'You sit up there on the mines, you have plenty of time to work on your chops.'

She picked up her cards, fanned them, and Ford watched her eyes flame when she saw the queens.

'So what are the stakes?' she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

'You choose,' said Ford.

'You've got nothing to play with,' she said, 'and you've got nothing I want.'

She discarded two cards and he dealt her a pair of nines to give her a full house. He discarded one and dealt himself a replacement, but didn't look at it.

He watched her look at her hand and said, 'How about if I win, I get to choose where I sleep tonight?'

She looked at her cards again, then at his hand face down on the table. 'Let me ask you something,' she said. 'When you got cute with me in the bathroom just then, did you forget that your wife was dead?'

He took a drink and thought about it. 'You know,' he said, 'being with you these last couple of days, seeing you like that in the bathroom, I guess I did forget.'

'I didn't,' she said. 'I was thinking that after we spent the night together in Marble Bar you shot a man in the head because you had some dumb idea that if you saved your wife from him you might have a chance of getting her back.'

Ford looked down at the four aces in his hand and felt the sucking feeling in his chest return.

'Am I going to have to remind you again at some later time that she is why we are here?' said Kavanagh. 'Because I will do that.'

She looked at her cards again and sighed. 'There's blood on the cards,' she said.

'I sliced my thumb,' said Ford, showing her the cut, which had gone white now that the bleeding had stopped. Kavanagh looked at the peeled orange and saw the little black fruit knife. She picked it up and ran her thumb along the edge. 'It's a ceramic blade,' she said. 'They stay sharp.' She put the knife back down on the table and picked up her cards and looked at them again. 'I've played enough poker against cops to know the odds of getting a full house first hand,' she said. She threw the cards down face up. 'You think I'm dumb enough to walk into a trap like that?'

Ford showed her his four aces. 'We both walked into this trap,' he said. 'Walked into a five-star cage.'

'I'm where I want to be,' said Kavanagh. 'Locked in the same cage as Alan McCann. And there is a chance that Alannah is here too.'

'And Zhou,' said Ford. He picked up the cards and riffled them, than showed her the ace of spades on the top. He false shuffled, cut the cards, then showed her the ace again on the top.

'You've got some nice moves,' she said. 'But I'm not going to gamble with you.'

'You play against me, it's not gambling.'

'Not when you cheat me with a cold deck.'

'We're just having fun.'

'Well, you keep telling me it's not gambling, and one day you might believe it yourself. You bet on horses.'

'No, I bet against bookies.'

'And what lie do you tell yourself about poker?'

'Poker is a mind game of the first order,' said Ford, dealing another hand. 'It's a game about people that happens to be played with cards. You need knowledge of probability, strategy, psychology and a whole lot of self-discipline.'

Ford's cocktail was standing on the table next to his right elbow and Kavanagh chinked her own glass against it. 'I never figured self-discipline as one of your strengths.'

Ford picked up his glass and was finishing it when Singh walked through the door without knocking.

'Dinner is served,' he said, with a bow.

15.

Singh led them back into the twins' suite, into the bright sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The light had changed now, taken a golden hue as the sun sank in the west, the Rottnest Island a dark line along the horizon.

The twins were sitting at a small square dining table that had been set up in the corner by the piano, in the angle between the windows that faced the river and the park. They stood up to greet them. Paulo had changed into a single-breasted white suit over a white silk shirt open at the neck. Sofia wore a white pant suit, the jacket short and the pants high-waisted and flared at the bottom, hiding her feet. A simple silver chain circled her slender neck and from it hung a single pearl, the largest Ford had ever seen. Brother and sister both held champagne flutes and raised them as Ford and Kavanagh approached.

'Welcome again,' said Paulo. 'We were just enjoying an aperitif and watching the sun go down. Please join us.'

Ford looked at the ice bucket on the table and the bottle of Pol Roger sitting in it and said, 'Yes please.'

He glanced at Kavanagh and saw her watching the twins closely. He followed her eyes and looked at the sister and then the brother and intercepted an exchange of signals between them: one flash through a lowered saintly lid, one quiver of a nostril, and he realized he was part of a game. These signals were not aimed at him or Kavanagh, they had merely walked in upon a performance already in full swing.

Paulo put his glass on the table, lifted the bottle from the ice and filled two more flutes. He lifted them gently, a finger and thumb pinching each stem, and presented them to his guests.

‘I hope you don’t think it’s rude of us to be drinking French wine,’ he said. ‘Australia has some remarkable wines, but we have yet to find a sparkling wine that fits our palate.’

‘This type of rudeness I’ll allow,’ said Ford, putting his nose in the glass, letting the bouquet fill his nostrils.

Kavanagh took a big sip, puffing out her cheeks and swilling it round her mouth before swallowing. ‘Alan McCann has a winery a few hours south of here,’ she said, joining in the game, waiting to see if she could put them off-balance. Sofia took a gentle sip from her own glass, her eyes sparkling as if happy that Kavanagh had come to play.

‘He served it to us once in Macau,’ she said. ‘It was as you’d expect. Very robust, full of those Margaret River herbaceous aromas, but far too fleshy. It wasn’t very elegant. The very mirror of the man himself.’

Sofia turned her back on them and stared out of the windows at the sky. The blue was deepening to purple in the east, and tinged with orange in the west. There was no trace of cloud, the sky a perfect dome arching from horizon to horizon. There were waves on the river, the ocean breeze riffling the surface of the water.

‘We don’t come to Perth often,’ she said. ‘But when we do it is always a breath of fresh air. Macau is so foul, the atmosphere. The pollution drifts across the river from Guanzhou and Shenzen, the sky always grey and humid and heavy. The sky pushes down on you and the crowds hem you in and I always feel I can’t breathe. We’d live in Paris if father would let us, but he wants us close to him in Macau.’

The low sun was reflecting off the glass towers of the city now, throwing shafts of yellow light across the room. ‘The sun here is too fierce for us in the daytime,’ said Sofia, shielding her eyes against the glare. ‘But we enjoy this time of day, and that wind, the Fremantle Doctor, really is a tonic.’

Paulo joined her at the window. 'So much space,' he said. 'You don't seem to make the most of it. It is such a luxury, and yet you waste it. The river and the city are lovely, but the suburbs are hideous, so under-imagined. They circle the city like temporary camps on the margins, full of those nasty concrete buildings that look like they have been assembled rather than built.'

Ford stepped up to the window. He looked to the hills in the east and saw a small column of smoke still rising from the tree line. He turned his head east and looked towards Kings Park. Beyond the mass of trees was the suburb where he lived, and the house where his wife had died, and the thought of her pulled at his chest. He looked at Sofia and Paulo, their bland smiles of entitlement, and wondered how far their game would go, and whether death was as much a part of it as champagne. He looked down at the white tablecloth and the matching napkins and took a mouthful of the champagne and forced it down along with his anger.

'Why is everything fucking thing in this hotel white?' he said. It came out louder than he had intended and the twins turned to him wide-eyed.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but I noticed the theme.'

Paulo had recovered his composure. 'The white is an expression of the legend of Penglai Island,' he said, as if that explained everything.

'You'll excuse my ignorance,' said Ford.

Sofia turned to him and spoke slowly and softly, pausing as if to construct each sentence complete in her head before releasing it.

'Penglai Island is a mythical fairy hill within the sea, a dreamlike place where the Eight Immortals banquet. Everything on the mountain appears white, while its palaces are made from gold and platinum, and jewels grow on trees. There is no pain and no winter. There are rice bowls and wine glasses that never empty no matter how much

you eat or drink. There are magical fruits on Penglai that can cure any disease, grant eternal youth, and even raise the dead.'

'And do they have gambling tables on this magical mountain?' asked Ford. 'It seems a strange name for a casino.'

'It was our father's vision,' said Sofia. 'He wanted to create a haven that embodied the four qualities of true luxury: space, light, comfort and peace.'

'Does your father still run the casino?' asked Ford.

Sofia lowered her eyes and fell silent. Paulo watched her and said, 'Our brother, Robert, runs the casino and hotel business.'

'And what do you do?'

'We designed this hotel, and five like it in Paris, London, Milan, San Francisco.'

'And Macau?'

Paulo nodded. 'If we had left it to Robert, the hotels would have been all red and gold, like a Hong Kong dim sum restaurant.'

Ford gazed out of the window, looking down at the river foreshore. An empty block of land stood between the hotel and the strip of green grass bordering the river. A piling rig was parked in the middle of the block, surrounded by churned mud and stacks of reinforcement cages. 'Is someone building in front of you?' he said. 'You wouldn't want to lose this view.'

Paulo followed Ford's eyes down to the construction site. 'That's Robert's grand plan,' he said. 'He bought up all that land adjoining the Esplanade. He's going to expand the hotel, build some condominiums, and then the casino. He's got a model in his office and he's very proud of it. You should ask to see it when you meet him.'

'Perth already has a casino,' said Ford.

'Robert thinks there is room for two,' said Paulo. 'He wants to branch out from the casino in Macau.'

‘There’s not enough punters here,’ said Ford. ‘Less than two million people in the state. Barely enough grandmothers pumping their pensions in the pokies to keep one casino in business.’

‘Robert doesn’t care about the locals. He’s looking to bring the high rollers from the Chinese mainland. All tied to his existing VIP client base in Macau. High net worth individuals that he can fly down on junkets and entertain in his VIP gaming rooms, far away from those terrible slot machines.’

‘Seems a long way to come when they’ve got Macau on their doorstep.’

Paulo smiled. ‘There are some gamblers who prefer to gamble in private, without the Communist Party looking over their shoulder, asking questions about where their money came from.’

Ford thought for a moment before he said, ‘The state government doesn’t hand out casino licences as readily as they do parking tickets. Not to overseas nationals with corrupt cops on their payroll.’

Paulo shrugged and took a long drink from his glass, tipping it up, emptying the last of it, looking at Ford out of the corner of his eye and waiting for him to put it together.

Ford only took a beat to work it out. ‘Alan McCann,’ he said, almost spitting out the name. ‘Your brother is going to get McCann to front the casino.’

Paulo didn’t answer, pretending to savour the taste of his champagne, but Ford saw his eyebrow lift just a fraction and that was all the confirmation he needed. ‘You don’t seem happy about that,’ he said.

Paulo tilted his head slightly and swallowed. ‘When my father started out after the war, Macau was sandwiched between the People’s Liberation Army on one side and the Kuomintang on the other. He made the most of the business opportunities that were available.’



'I heard he started out smuggling gasoline and running guns to the Communists,' said Kavanagh.

Paulo didn't flinch, barely stopping to draw breath. 'In that era he had to deal with some unsavoury individuals, but that was long ago. My sister and I believe it is time that the family moved on and got out of the casino business. It is so very vulgar, don't you think?'

'I like casinos,' said Ford. 'They concentrate all the suckers in one place and then let them drink.' He looked at his empty glass and waved it at Paulo. 'I thought you said the wine glasses never ran empty in this place?'

Paulo turned nodded at Singh, who disappeared through the door. Then he lifted the champagne bottle from the ice and poured the last of it into Ford's glass.

'If you ditch the casinos, you've still got the rest of it,' said Ford. 'The hotels, the property development, the shipping company, the mining interests.'

Paulo's eyes widened very slightly at that. Not much, but Ford had seen enough poker tells to know that he had hit. Sofia saw it too, and came to her brother's rescue. 'Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt,' she said. 'All work of that sort should be done by machines.'

Ford sipped from his glass and let that sit for a while before he asked, 'So how old is your father?'

'He is eighty,' said Paulo, 'but he has the vigour and vitality of a much younger man.'

'I'd like to meet him,' said Ford. 'It's a hell of a family you have here.'

Singh appeared through the door pushing a trolley carrying another ice bucket and several silver platters with polished domed covers. Paulo and Sofia moved to the table, standing silently behind chairs opposite each other, waiting for Kavanagh and Ford to join them. Kavanagh took her place, resting her hands on the chair and looking at Ford. If she was trying to tell him something he didn't know what it was, so he waited for

Sofia to sit and then they all took their places, resting their hands in their laps while Singh put the platters on the table and poured white wine into their fresh glasses.

Paulo raised his wine glass and held it out, looking to the others, waiting for them to do the same. When their glasses were in the air he said, '*Saúde, dinheiro e amor, e tempo para desfrutá-los!*' He clinked his glass with each of theirs in turn. 'A Portuguese toast: health, money and love, and time enough to enjoy them.'

'You speak Portuguese?' asked Kavanagh, an edge to her voice now, like she was getting tired of the small talk.

Paulo nodded. 'Cantonese, Mandarin, and a little German for the ski season. French of course. Portuguese is our mother's language. Her family is one of the oldest in Macau.'

Ford could see it now, where the twins got their good looks: tall and slim, noses that were straight and cheekbones that were high, a perfect mix of east and west. He wondered whether that was why they felt so at ease travelling, or maybe the opposite was true: they didn't feel at home anywhere.

'So your father married into an old white family?' said Kavanagh. 'New money married into old? Was he trying to make himself look legitimate?'

She looked from brother to sister, seeing if she could get a reaction, but they were smiling at each other, exchanging their signals. Neither of them seemed to know the meaning of embarrassment in the presence of the other. The hotel suite that they shared was like a shell, protecting them from everything.

They fell back into silence as Singh reached across the table and lifted the covers off the food. The first platter had four round white patties of compressed rice. Singh laid one on each of their plates and then picked up another platter and went around the table, building a column of seafood on top of the rice. Ford recognized chunks of crayfish tail, scallop and something that looked like abalone. Singh's fingers worked

quickly and skilfully with the food, with the same speed and grace he had shown when taking the gun off Kavanagh. When he had finished they each had a delicate tower in front of them, with an arc of pale sauce curving around the plate.

‘Even the food is white,’ said Ford.

Sofia ignored him. ‘One of the things I adore about Perth is the fresh seafood,’ she said.

Kavanagh poked at it with her fork. ‘I’ve got to admit that the appeal of abalone escapes me. Always tastes like rubber to me.’

‘Perhaps your palate is not attuned to its subtlety,’ said Sofia, placing the tiniest morsel onto the end of her fork and lifting it to her lips.

‘Maybe it’s an Asian thing,’ said Ford, starting with the crayfish. ‘The abalone season lasts for just one day, otherwise they would pick the reefs clean. The bag limit is only five shells each, so the Vietnamese and Chinese get the whole family out there. Grandma and the kids, everyone out on the rocks. Every year at least one poor sod gets washed off the reef and drowns, just to get this tasteless thing.’

‘Our chef knows how to prepare it,’ said Sofia. ‘He tenderises it for an hour with a mallet, then simmers it in mushroom broth for several hours before slicing it very thin.’

Kavanagh put a sliver of abalone in her mouth and Ford watched her face change as she tasted it, her eyes softened and she licked her lips and when she closed her mouth she was smiling. She helped herself to another mouthful and they all ate in silence.

When their plates were clean Singh appeared and cleared to the trolley, laid out a platter of cheese and refilled their glasses.

Sofia went for the cheese first, so soft it was losing its shape and started to run across the plate. ‘It’s so difficult to find good cheese in Australia,’ she said, loading her knife with it and smearing it across a piece of ripped bread. ‘You are so fussy about pasteurisation here. We have to bring this brie from France.’

Kavanagh wrinkled her nose at the smell of it. 'Your father was running guns, and now you're smuggling cheese?'

Sofia smiled and drank from her wine glass, and Ford could see Kavanagh's impatience rising again.

'You were talking earlier, about this fairy island in the sea,' she said. 'You were telling us how the Eight Immortals had their lunch there? Well, we met one of them.'

Sofia took another sip of her wine and exchanged looks with her brother.

'He was a cripple called himself Li Tieguai. Does he work for you?'

Sofia reached across and took some more cheese, and nodded to Singh. Kavanagh looked jumpy, snapping her head around to look at the butler, but he was only bringing more wine, a half-bottle of dessert wine that he poured into small glasses. Kavanagh was shifting in her seat.

'We've enjoyed your fancy French wine and your stinking cheese and your fluffy white bathrobes,' she said. 'But maybe now we can ditch the polite small talk and get down to why the fuck you brought us here.'

Paulo sipped at his dessert wine, swallowed and dabbed at his lips with his napkin. He folded it carefully and put it beside his plate. 'The man who calls himself Iron Crutch was unknown to us before today, and we have never met him,' he said. 'He made contact with us by telephone saying that you were looking for Alan McCann and that we might care to talk to you.'

'Here we are,' said Ford. 'So let's talk.'

'What is your business with McCann?' asked Paulo.

Ford snorted. 'Are you being coy?'

'We know that your wife was living with him in Macau. We met her there on several occasions. Then she left and we heard she had been arrested in Australia.'

'She came here to do a job for your family,' said Ford. 'She pegged a gold mining lease in Marble Bar, right across the only viable exit from an iron ore lease that McCann owns. It put McCann in a bind, made sure there was nobody else he could negotiate with apart from your family.'

'We didn't know that,' said Paulo.

'Did you know she was dead?' said Ford.

The twins looked at each other and then lowered their eyes and stared down at their own hands. 'We are sorry for your loss,' they said in unison.

'She came back to Australia under the protection of your family,' said Ford. He'd been trying to play it cool but now he had the same edge in his voice as Kavanagh, the same frustration. He took a slug from the wine glass but his mouth was filled with the cloying sweetness of the dessert wine and that only increased his anger. 'Everything leads back to your family and Alan McCann,' he said.

'I can assure you that my sister and I had nothing to do with your wife's death, or any of the business in Marble Bar. Neither did our parents. The only members of our family that have dealings with McCann are Robert and his mother.'

'You said we were going to meet him,' said Ford. 'When's that?'

'The family will be gathering tonight in Robert's suite,' said Paulo. 'He has set up a private gaming room on this floor. There is a group of friends he has invited down from Macau to celebrate his engagement, and they will be playing poker. Our father will be there, so will McCann and his daughter, and no doubt Robert's mother. Let us pray to the gods that she doesn't want to sing.'

Ford perked up. 'Robert plays poker?'

'So does McCann,' said Paulo. 'They all flew down from Macau together in Robert's jet. I heard they played poker the whole trip.'

'Who won?'

'I was told that McCann is a million or so down, said Paulo, smiling, relieved that the conversation had moved on.

Ford took another sip of the wine. Now that the sweetness wasn't a surprise, it was good. 'So Robert's got his casino up and running already? Before he's got his licence?'

'I wouldn't call it a casino,' said Paulo. 'It's a private game. The players deposited money with the casino in Macau, and play with chips issued from there.'

'So if the police burst in, it's just some buddies having a private game?' said Ford.

Kavanagh snorted. 'You may not have noticed, but the police are never going to be able to get to these floors. Nobody has been able to talk to McCann. Not the police, not the papers. We might as well be in China up here. I'm not sure it even counts as Australian soil.'

She drank from the wine and pulled a sour face, putting it down. 'So do you want to tell us what you've got planned?' she said. When neither of the twins answered she said, 'You're going to put us in that room with them all and see what happens, watch the fur fly, just for shit and giggles? I don't care about your game. I'll go along with it and I'll make sure you get good value for your ringside seats. I just want to get close to McCann and your brother and that pock-marked bastard.'

The twins said nothing to this, looking at each other and then at Singh. 'Get him to bring some brandy,' said Ford. 'This girly wine isn't cutting it with me.' Singh nodded at Ford and walked to a cabinet at the side of the room. Ford remembered what Singh had said about not approaching things directly with the twins, so he went back to the small talk. 'Can you get me into this poker game?' he said.

'What for?' said Paulo.

'Shit and giggles,' said Ford. 'Isn't that what we're doing here?' Paulo smiled at this, looking relaxed now that the edge had gone from the conversation. Kavanagh was smiling too.

'You don't have the money to play in that game,' said Paulo. 'It's a million buy-in. American dollars.'

Ford kept his face rigid, controlling his eyes and breathing like he had just been dealt pocket aces, not wanting to show anything to the twins. 'Then I'll need three million to play properly,' he said. Paulo didn't flinch, but Sofia's eyes widened, and then she covered it with a smile. Kavanagh was giving him narrow eyes, not knowing where he was going with it.

'And where would you get that?' asked Sofia.

'I carry that sort of money around in my wallet every day,' said Ford.

Sofia was still smiling, her eyes sparkling, back in the game. She reached across the table and took hold of Ford's wrist. He looked down at her elegant fingers, the perfect manicure, his hand looking old and weathered next to her perfect white skin. Her hand found his watch and she ran her index finger across the glass.

'This Patek Philippe is very elegant,' she said. 'I saw it and I thought it didn't really fit with the way you dressed, but you never can tell with Australians. What do you call it? Stealth wealth? Always so understated.'

'I'm not rich,' said Ford. 'And I'm not Australian. I'm English.' Sofia took her hand away and Ford looked down at his watch. 'I stole this,' he said. 'And then it stopped working and cost me a fortune to get fixed.'

Kavanagh was catching on now. 'What else did you steal?' she said.

She had been with him when he took the watch from the underground bunker in Marble Bar. McCann had used it to hide the gold stolen from his own mine at Gwardar, along with a lot of other things he didn't want the police or the tax office to find. There was cash, guns, watches, and bearer bonds for the offshore holding companies where he had squirrelled his assets.

Ford leaned sideways on his chair and took his wallet from his back pocket and laid it on the table. They were all looking at him. Even Singh was watching, holding the brandy bottle and a pair of balloon glasses. Ford felt like a magician, getting ready for the big reveal as he opened the wallet and took out a small felt pouch not much bigger than a postage stamp. He pushed the cheese plate away from the centre of the table and held the pouch over the white table cloth.

The diamond that fell out of the pouch was small, slightly less than two carats, but it was pure red, the deepest colour ever seen in a Kimberley diamond. When Ford had stolen it from McCann's bunker he had not known that it was the most valuable thing in it.

Sofia's hand darted across the table like a snake and she had the stone between her finger and thumb before anyone could react. She held it up to the light, rolling it slowly back and forth in a shaft of light, the last daylight streaming horizontally through the window from the setting sun. Her face was in rapture.

'I know this diamond,' she said. 'They call it The Phoenix. I bid on it at auction two years ago. There have only ever been three red diamonds larger than one carat come up at auction. Alan McCann outbid my agent. He used his company's funds to buy it, then sold it to his family trust for a fraction of its value. He defrauded his own stockholders. Stole from them to buy this.'

She put it back on the table, leaning on her elbows to stare at it, a tiny circle of pure red against the table cloth, a radiant beacon of colour in the white room. 'Sell it to me,' she said.

Ford laid his hand over the stone. 'It's not for sale.'

'Did you steal it from him?' said Sofia, new respect for him shining out of her face.

'I liberated it,' said Ford. 'I'll use it as collateral for the game. Get me a line of credit for three million and a seat at the table.'



‘Of course,’ said Sofia. ‘We would have staked you anyway, with or without the stone.’

Ford picked it up and let it roll around in the palm of his hand. ‘I couldn’t do that. It would make me an unprincipled jerk. Since I don’t have many friends, I have to get along with myself, and I’m not going to play with your money.’

‘Those are some principles,’ said Kavanagh. ‘You won’t borrow but you’ll steal.’ But she was smiling when she said it, and Ford was enjoying himself.

‘Three million isn’t that much,’ said Sofia. ‘In the VIP room in Macau we have tables where the minimum stake is a hundred thousand. The stakes in the room here are just friendly.’

‘What’s McCann playing with? He’s supposed to be in liquidation.’

‘Robert gives him money. It’s McCann’s own money that Robert has laundered through Macau. Robert enjoys being McCann’s personal cash machine. Small amounts, he only gives him a few million at a time. Likes keeping him on the hook.’

‘So I’ll take McCann’s money. Make him go running back to his sugar daddy from more pocket money.’

‘If you won’t sell me the stone, then you simply must lend it to me,’ said Sofia.

‘What for?’

‘I will wear it this evening,’ she said. ‘We have a jeweller at the hotel who can set this for me in a couple of hours.’ She leaned over further and reached for the stone and Ford let her take it.

‘Didn’t you say that jewels grow on trees on Penglai Island’ he said.

‘Indeed,’ said Sofia, staring into the stone. ‘If the gods made anything finer than they kept it for themselves. It’s so small and so perfect, it will drive Patti wild with envy.’ She clenched her shoulders, pushing her elbows together until they touched, her face lit up like a little girl on her birthday. ‘And red is the colour of luck.’

A knock at the door shook her from her reverie. Singh put the brandy on the table and walked to the door. One of the Gurkhas stepped inside holding a pair of garment bags, the coat hangers dangling from each hand. He looked embarrassed, as if it was not part of the job he had signed on for.

‘We found you some clothes for this evening,’ said Sofia. ‘I am afraid they are our cast-offs but it is fortunate that we are all about the same size. We have a seamstress in the hotel who has let them out a little.

‘Your own jeweller and your own tailor?’ said Kavanagh.

‘Of course,’ said Sofia. ‘What sort of hotel doesn’t?’

Paulo stood up and put his hands together, relaxed now, happy that the game was back on the twins’ terms. ‘Shall we get ready?’ he said.

**16.**

Kavanagh closed the bedroom door and hung the garment bag on the back of it. She took the knife out of her pocket, the small black blade from the card game she had palmed earlier, and laid it on the bedside table. She had walked down the hallway twice without the ceramic blade setting off the metal detector.

She went back to the garment bag and ran the zipper open down the side, pulled the bag down, and the little black cocktail dress was revealed. She ran her hand down the fabric, soft under her fingers, silk mixed with something else, taffeta or tulle, and felt the scalloped lace around the neckline and down the cleavage. The same lace was around the hem, which looked like it would fall just above her knees. She looked for the label and found it in the zip at the back: Givenchy Paris. She wondered how much it had cost, and tried to remember the most expensive piece of clothing she had ever bought.

Her father had taken her to Perth when she was seventeen to buy her a dress for her high school formal. He refused to tell her how much it had cost, but he had put aside money from his sergeant's salary for six months to buy it. It was still wrapped in plastic in the wardrobe at home, not something she would ever wear again. Apart from the big frock, all she had ever saved for was her leather jacket, now hung in the wardrobe.

She kicked off the canvas espadrilles, undid her linen trousers and dropped them to the floor, then started unbuttoning her shirt. When the shirt fell open she saw her underwear, the white sports bra and panties that had been through the wash too many times and were no longer pure white. The fabric had started to fray at the seams and the elastic was stretched and slack. She'd had the underwear longer than the leather jacket, and was thinking about the last time she'd bought any, and whether that coincided with

the last time she'd had a man, when the mobile phone in the side table chimed. Kavanagh sat on the edge of the bed and opened the drawer and looked at the red phone that Iron Crutch had given her. She glanced over her shoulder, not sure where the security might be, and decided to leave the phone out of sight in the drawer. She read the message: 'Progress is being made. Predict success soon.'

She was about to close the drawer when she saw the knife. She picked it up, keeping it out of sight between her thighs, letting her shirt tails fall in her lap to hide it. The knife had a narrow black ceramic blade, the point not much longer than her thumb, and when she ran her finger along it she could feel it slicing her skin it was so sharp. The handle was plastic and in two halves, fixed to the tang of the blade with two plastic grub screws. She jammed her fingernail in the slot of the first screw and it loosened without any resistance. Soon she had both screws and the handle stripped away and was left with the flat blade. It was a serviceable shiv that she could conceal in her pocket or strapped to her leg. She laid it flat against the inside of her arm, and was thinking about where she might get tape or elastic bands to hold it in place when the door opened and Sofia walked in.

She had a wine glass in each hand, and a glossy pink shopping bag dangling from the crook of each elbow. She seemed pleased to have surprised Kavanagh, walking towards her with the wine held out as an offering. Kavanagh jumped up off the bed, her shirt falling open, the knife dropping to the floor, and she swept it under the bed with her foot as she stretched out her hand to take the glass.

'Now that the boys are gone, I thought we girls could talk,' said Sofia, smiling. Kavanagh frowned back at her, not liking being called a girl, or the assumption that her gender made her complicit in any other woman's secrets. So she drank the wine and waited to see what Sofia's next play might be. Kavanagh looked down at Sofia's feet while she drank, small and dainty in flat white pumps, so light on her feet that it was no

surprise she could approach unheard. She then looked at her own bare feet, so big in comparison, even though she was the same height as Sofia. Kavanagh looked at the callouses and the blackened nail on her big toe, and wondered how she looked when she walked. Not like a catwalk model or a dancer, she thought. She walked like a cop: long strides, toes out, as if she was still wearing the heavy equipment belt.

‘The way you walk, the way you carry yourself,’ she said to Sofia. ‘You’re like a model or something. Maybe you were a dancer once.’

Sofia put down her wine glass on the dressing table and laid the shopping bags on the bed. ‘I was a model for a while in Paris, when I was still a teenager,’ she said. ‘It horrified our mother, of course. She thought it so very vulgar. For me it was just something to do during a gap year after school. I got to meet the designers, get my hands on the latest clothes. I gave it up when I went to the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts.’

Kavanagh pulled her shirt closed, folded her arms across her chest, cradling her wine glass. She nodded towards the black dress hanging on the door. ‘You said this dress was yours, but I’m bigger than you. One or two sizes, maybe. There’s not enough material there to have it let out.’

‘It’s from a few years ago,’ said Sofia, ‘after I finished modelling. When I started eating again. I was bigger when I was studying. They say that French women don’t get fat, but the rest of us do when we eat their cuisine.’

‘You need to stay away from that full-fat cheese.’

‘I’ve got my weight back down again now,’ said Sofia, looking at the dress. ‘It’s vintage Givenchy. I’m just glad somebody will get the opportunity of looking fabulous in it.’

‘Where I grew up the shops didn’t have anything like this,’ said Kavanagh. ‘Getting dressed up for a night out meant ironing your best jeans.’

‘And where was that?’

‘East of here. The Wheatbelt. A small town you never heard of.’

‘You lived on a farm?’

‘No, we were in town. My father was the local police sergeant.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Sofia. ‘And what about your mother?’

‘She died when I was two years old. I have no memories of her, only photos.’

Sofia turned away then, looking bored at the way the conversation was going. ‘What’s this hard luck story?’ she said. ‘Don’t try to convince me you were ever unloved.’ She took the dress off the back of the door and held it up in front of Kavanagh, checking it for size, tilting her head to one side as she ran her eyes up Kavanagh from her bare feet to her hair.

Kavanagh felt herself blush. ‘I’ve never worn anything like this before,’ she said.

‘You don’t need to be taught how to wear clothes.’

‘Maybe I do. I don’t spend anything on what I wear.’

‘Then you’ve got me to help,’ said Sofia, returning the dress to the hook.

‘I wouldn’t know what to wear underneath it.’

Sofia reached out and grabbed Kavanagh’s shirt and pulled it open, and when she saw the greying sports bra and knickers she smiled and put her hand over her mouth. ‘I’m glad I brought something else,’ she said, letting the shirt fall closed and reaching for the shopping bags. She pulled boxes from the bags, tossing them onto the bed, ripping off the lids and scattering the tissue paper from inside. She lifted up the underwear and showed it off, a black lace bra and a tiny pair of black silk panties. She looked down at Kavanagh’s legs, at the Celtic bands tattooed around her ankles, at the bruises on her shins and the scrapes under her knees.

‘Normally I’d recommend bare legs with this dress,’ she said. ‘But under the circumstances I think you should wear stockings.’ She opened another box and pulled

out a lace suspender belt and two packets of black stockings. 'Alright darling,' she said, 'it's time to put it all together.'

Kavanagh looked at her, her arms still folded across her chest.

'Don't be shy,' said Sofia. 'You need to get dressed.'

Kavanagh thought for a moment, and decided it was no different from the police locker room. She had no problem stripping in front of the other women, so she put herself in that place and took off her shirt and her old underwear and threw them in the corner of the room. She stood naked in the middle of the room, feeling the cold breeze from the air vents raising goose bumps on her skin, and grateful for having shaved her legs the day before.

Sofia handed her the suspender belt first, and Kavanagh stepped into it and pulled it up around her waist. Then she pulled on the panties, enjoying the feeling of the silk against her skin. Next Sofia passed her the bra, and Kavanagh struggled with the flimsy straps. 'I need help with this,' she said.

Sofia stepped behind her and fastened the bra, then fussed with the suspender belt, turning it to fit snugly on Kavanagh's hips. Kavanagh could feel Sofia's breath on the back of her neck, warmer than the cool air from the air conditioning, smelling faintly of wine. Then she felt Sofia's fingers on her back, tracing the outline of her tattoo, the Buddhist prayer inked into her left shoulder blade.

'I can't read this,' said Sofia.

'It's a Thai prayer,' said Kavanagh. 'The Five Sacred Lines.'

'You are so beautiful' said Sofia. 'Why would you deface yourself like this?' Now her fingers found the tattoo across the small of her back, just above the suspender belt, that read: 'Truth becomes Strength.'

'The prayer brings protection,' said Kavanagh.

'You have faith in Buddhism?'

‘There are parts of it that make sense to me.’

Sofia sat down on the bed, running her eyes over Kavanagh and the underwear, her face blank. ‘I showed you the goddess Guanyin earlier,’ she said. ‘Did you know that Guanyin started as a man? She is a manifestation of Avalokitesvara, a male *bodhissatva* who assumed female form when he came first to China from India. She realised that the world had become so corrupt and degenerate that the only way her compassion could be understood was as a woman. When she finally chooses to leave the world of suffering and struggle she will revert to her male form, but it doesn’t matter if she is male or female, because the ultimate reality is emptiness, *sunyata*.’

‘You don’t strike me as a religious person,’ said Kavanagh, picking up a packet of stockings and breaking the cellophane seal.

Sofia shook her head. ‘Seeing your short hair, your strong jaw line, your beauty and your strength, you reminded me of Guanyin. You have the best elements of a man and a woman.’

‘I’ll take that as a compliment,’ said Kavanagh, sitting down on the edge of the bed, pointing her toes and rolling the stockings up her leg. When she stood up, Sofia was waiting, holding up the dress.

‘When I wore this last I was a little chubby. The weight I put on when I stopped modelling was puppy fat, but with you it’s all muscle.’

‘You need to keep fit in my job.’

‘I bet you could lift me with one hand. I’m like bamboo, but you’re like willow. Why do you wear your hair short, like a man?’

‘Your hair is short.’

‘This is a French bob. It’s not a man’s style.’

‘It’s all about the job. As a cop, I wore a cap. I was running, sweating, getting up early, staying up late. Short hair is a lot easier.’



Kavanagh took the dress from her and put it on, turning so Sofia could do up the zip for her. She turned back and Sofia had opened a door on the wardrobe to reveal a full length mirror. Kavanagh looked at her reflection, not recognising herself for a second, not quite sure whether she liked the effect the dress had on her. ‘I need shoes,’ she said.

Sofia already had a box open, showing her a pair of plain black shoes with kitten heels. Kavanagh was grateful she wouldn’t have to teeter around in high heels. Sofia put them on the floor and Kavanagh stepped into them, checking the finished look in the mirror. She walked to the wardrobe and closed the door.

‘Where’s your brother?’ she asked.

‘He’s in the next room, helping your friend to get dressed. We thought he’d need even more help than you.’

‘You and your brother, you seem close.’

‘You have no siblings?’

‘Only child.’

‘I love my brother deeply,’ said Sofia. ‘He is my life’s work, my vocation. He and I are like two halves of the same person, like yin and yang. We complement each other. I had thought that I might give you to him, but now you are here I want you for myself.’

Kavanagh thought about that and decided not to acknowledge it. ‘Maybe it’s like what you said about Guanyin,’ she said. ‘Male and female manifestations of the same spirit.’

Sofia smiled, her eyes sparkling. ‘You’re not quite the woman you appear to be, are you?’

‘Is any woman?’

‘All that’s left now is some make-up,’ said Sofia.

‘I don’t wear it,’ said Kavanagh. ‘Again, it’s a cop thing. You don’t want your mascara to run when someone spits in your face.’

Sofia frowned. ‘And what about in the evening, like now? Don’t you want to look your best?’

‘It’s not like that,’ said Kavanagh. ‘Hiding behind a mask of make-up isn’t me.’

‘Why do you act as if being beautiful is for the benefit of others? Beauty is for itself. Why deny it?’

‘I don’t define myself by my appearance,’ said Kavanagh.

‘So what is defines you? Your job? Chasing lowlifes? How very dull and depressing that must be.’ She was collecting up the boxes, putting the tissue paper back and stacking them in the shopping bags.

‘Right now I’m chasing bigger game,’ said Kavanagh.

‘Alan McCann?’ said Sofia, stifling a giggle. ‘He’s not big game. He’s just pond life who has climbed out of the slime and learned to walk on two legs. Perth is a very small pond, you know.’

‘And your family is doing business with him.’

‘My brother is using McCann. Once he has the casino license and McCann’s mining assets, he’ll push him out of his company, dilute his shares. Then he’ll try and push the rest of us out of our family’s company.’ She stopped talking then, realising she’d said too much, but Kavanagh was enjoying having her on the back foot.

‘And your father? He rubs shoulders with organised crime, the junket operators and the rolling chip scams. He knows they loan shark, run prostitutes in the Macau casinos.’

‘You are an outsider, *bakgwei-mui*,’ said Sofia. ‘Don’t come into this hotel with your western ideas of right and wrong. You don’t know how this family works and as our guest you should do us the courtesy of not judging us.’

‘Your father does not seem so very different from McCann.’

‘My father would eat up and spit out small-time operators like McCann before breakfast. It would be a loss of face for him to speak to McCann as an equal. You should not put yourself on a pedestal. I believe you were suspended for colluding with criminals.’

‘I was compromised by a corrupt superior.’

‘So the police here are corrupt too? I wonder where you find it in yourself to be so moral.’

‘It’s not the immorality that offends me, so much as the greed.’

Sofia thought about that, taking the bags to the wardrobe and stacking them inside. When she turned around she had regained her calm, her face serene again.

‘Robert and McCann are similar, I’ll concede that,’ she said. ‘They are what the Chinese call hungry ghosts. People who return as hungry ghosts are driven by greed, a hunger they can never satisfy. Robert has always been like that: vain, ambitious, decadent. Did you know that he used to be a movie star?’

Kavanagh was leaning over, smoothing out the wrinkles in her stockings. ‘I can’t say I’ve seen him in anything.’

‘Do you watch a lot of Hong Kong movies? He won a few awards. You’ll see them later. He likes people to notice them. He was quite the heartthrob and the playboy. The girls, the fast cars, the cocaine.’

‘But now he’s settling down, getting married?’

‘I don’t know that they are the same thing for him. I always knew he’d marry a white girl, but I figured his mother would find someone a little better for him, someone with old money and taste.’

‘You don’t like Ellen McCann?’

‘She is as crass and boorish as her father. I know her father intervened in her drug use, sent her to rehab. They tried to hide it but we found out. A drug user like Robert, maybe that is what will bind them together. An odd sort of marriage.’

‘What about you? You ever going to get married?’

‘There was an Italian. I met him in Positano. He called himself a Count. He asked me to marry him. Quite persistent, but I think he was only after our money. He had lost his estates. He had charm, but no money. All he had was his title and his vanity, and that wasn’t enough.’

Sofia was looking at Kavanagh now, her head tilted to one side as she did when lost in thought, appraising the outfit. ‘It needs just one more thing,’ she said, and reached around her own neck and unclasped the silver chain that held the pearl at her throat. ‘I will be wearing the red stone,’ she said, ‘so you shall wear this.’

She wrapped the chain around Kavanagh’s neck. ‘My great grandmother bought this pearl from a Russian duchess, who had been given it by the Czar himself. There was a community of Russian aristocrats in Shanghai between the wars. They had fled the Bolshevik Revolution. Then Mao and his Red Army marched into Shanghai and they fled to Hong Kong with only what they could carry. The duchess sold her jewellery the first week she arrived.’

Sofia pulled the chain tight and Kavanagh felt it bite into her throat. For a moment the image of Diane Ford filled her mind, the red ligature marks on her neck, the broken blood vessels in her bulging eyes, and Kavanagh began to panic. She lifted her hand to grab at the chain but as her fingers reached it Sofia fitted the clasp and let the pearl swing free. Kavanagh let out a long slow breath as her fingers toyed with the pearl.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said.

Sofia was still behind her, her hands resting gently on Kavanagh’s shoulders, her breath in her ear.

'Let your mind be empty,' she whispered. 'There's nothing there. And you see it like that: nothing, emptiness. Then there's the sea, and the moon has risen full and round, white. You stare at the moon a long, long time until you feel calm and happy. Then the moon gets brighter and brighter until you see it is a pearl so bright you can only just bear to look at it. The pearl starts to grow, and before you know what's happening, it's Guanyin herself standing there against the sky.'

17.

Paulo was holding the suit hanger on the crook of one finger, showing Ford the lining of the jacket.

‘Chinese silk,’ he said, ‘from our own supplier in Suzhou.’

Ford looked at the plain charcoal suit and the crimson silk lining. ‘There’s no label,’ he said.

‘It’s bespoke,’ said Paulo, with a sigh. ‘My sister is the one who likes labels. I prefer what you Australians call stealth wealth. Try it on. Singh guessed your measurements, and he has a good eye. They took a couple of centimetres off the leg and let out a little in the waist, but the jacket should be fine.’

He nodded towards the plain white shirt that lay on the bed. Ford stripped off down to his boxers and picked up the shirt.

‘It’s the same silk,’ said Paulo.

Ford pushed his arm into the sleeve and caught Paulo looking at the scar on his shoulder, the red rosette of puckered flesh in the hollow of his clavicle. He pulled the shirt up over the old wound.

‘I was shot,’ he said.

‘By whom?’ asked Paulo.

‘Friends of Henk Roth,’ said Ford, putting his arm in the other sleeve and then examining the small mother-of-pearl buttons down the front. ‘You’ve met him.’

Paulo nodded, lifting the trousers off the hanger and passing them to Ford. ‘He is always standing two paces behind McCann’s shoulder, but I’ve never heard him speak.’

Ford took the pants and stepped into them. ‘He’s a man of few words. Used to be special forces in South Africa, then a mercenary in Bougainville, then a gold robber. Now he’s McCann’s bodyguard.’

'Not someone you want as an enemy.'

'Oh, we're friends now, him and me,' said Ford as he buttoned up the front of the pants. 'They're a little snug,' he said, pulling at the crotch.

Paulo shrugged. 'They will relax when you do,' he said. 'What happened to the man who shot you?'

'There were two men,' said Ford. 'Mercenaries hired by Roth. I shot one, Kavanagh killed the other.'

'Like Bonnie and Clyde?'

'Not so glamorous. She saved my life. More than that, she saved my pride, which is a more precious gift.'

'How deliciously dangerous you must be,' said Paulo, looking interested now.

'Not dangerous, just desperate.'

'Same thing,' said Paulo. 'Have you killed anyone else?' He held the jacket up for Ford to put on.

Ford was enjoying himself, liking that Paulo was excited, feeling the need to boast. He turned his back to Paulo, put his arms into the jacket and let Paulo pull it up over his shoulders.

'There were two other men in Marble Bar. I shot one of them,' said Ford, doing up one button on the jacket, shooting his cuffs and flexing his shoulders. It was a good fit.

'Perfect,' said Paulo, smoothing out the shoulders of the jacket. 'And did your partner kill the other man?'

'No,' said Ford. 'Henk Roth killed him. Those two men, they worked for your family.' He turned now, wanting to see the effect he was having on Paulo, but he was still smiling, as if at some private joke that he knew Ford would not understand. 'He was a big Maori, tattoos on his face. I can't imagine you would forget him if you ever saw him.'

Paulo nodded slowly, his eyes following the line of the suit buttons down towards the floor and Ford's stocking feet. 'Shoes, belt and tie and we're done,' he said, and stepped across to the wardrobe, opening a door to show a rack of ties. He pulled out a shelf of shoes and looked at Ford with eyebrow raised.

'Forty-six European, said Ford, and Paulo handed him a pair of black Oxfords.

'I met the Maori once,' said Paulo. 'One of Zhou's *ma jai*, which means he would have been working on my brother's behalf.' A look of mischief lit up his eyes and twisted his mouth. 'I wonder if Robert knows that McCann's man killed him?'

Ford sat on the edge of the bed and put on the shoes. When he stood up the soft leather moulded itself to his feet and he felt like he had worn them before.

'So what does Zhou do for Robert, apart from providing muscle?'

'He is Robert's link to organised crime in Macau and the Mainland.'

'I thought he was a cop?'

'Yes, but a corrupt one. Robert needs the brotherhoods that run the junket operators to bring high rollers from the mainland to his casino, for two simple reasons. Firstly, the Beijing government placed a limit on the amount of cash Chinese citizens can carry across the border to Macau, so the junkets give them a line of credit to gamble with. Secondly, gambling debts are not recognised by Chinese courts. The junkets help recover any debts the high rollers accrue.'

'Which is what the muscle is for?'

'Exactly. And to be able to collect on the debts, they need the green light from the Chinese police, which is how Zhou got to know them and how he got rich from the kickbacks.'

'But if he's no longer a cop, what power will he have over them?'

'Our father always keeps close relationships with the police. Every officer in Macau knows that when he retires he can get a job at my father's casino in Macau, and several



retired senior officers are directors and executives of his various companies and ventures.'

'But Zhou is not like that. What does he hold over the gangsters?'

'Just fear. They have the greatest respect for him. They call him *Dai Sai Gwai*.'

'I heard him called that already.'

'The Little Demon King. It's the Cantonese term for the Joker in a pack of cards. They say he smiles when he plays poker.'

'That's nothing to fear.'

'But you need the story behind it. Zhou was once in a private card game in Guangzhou with three local gangsters, all sworn members of one of the bigger tongs. They were playing Dealer's Choice and he called five-card stud, jokers wild. He dealt himself a joker, and the next time the deal came to him he did the same thing again. The men at the table accused him of cheating. The three of them were found the next day, sitting on a bench in Hongcheng Park, like they were just looking out over the river. All three in a row with their throats garrotted, smiling.'

'Always the neck, huh?' said Ford. 'Does Zhou work directly for Robert?'

'Robert keeps him at arm's length. He doesn't want to be seen with any links to organized crime, but that's been difficult since Zhou left Macau. I doubt that Zhou would do anything that might compromise Robert or his mother. Patti doesn't like Zhou very much. If he got the wrong side of her she'd have him shipped back to the mainland and handed over to the authorities.'

'So Patti pulls the strings?'

'Robert is soft boned. He needs guidance with the hard decisions.'

Ford cast his eye over the row of ties on the rack and picked a simple dark blue one with narrow pink diagonal stripes. He popped his collar and wrapped the tie around his neck, and as he tied it he realised Paolo wasn't wearing one. 'Do I need this?' he asked.

'I think the suit does,' said Paulo. 'You surprise me, going for pink.'

'It's cerise,' said Ford. 'By coincidence, these happen to be my old college colours.'

'Where did you study?' asked Paulo

It was a question that Ford had not been asked in twenty years. In England it would have been asked of him within the first hour of meeting someone, but in Australia there was never that desire to pigeon-hole you. He thought for a moment, enjoying the urge to impress Paulo with the old-school tie. He could see the eagerness in Paulo's eyes, the desire to label him, so he denied him. 'England,' he said, and left it at that. 'I have a woollen scarf in these colours. It's in a box at home. Never needed it in Perth.' No need for winter clothes, and no need for signifiers of background and privilege. At least not until today.

Ford completed the knot and pushed up the tie, folded down his collar. 'I could easily count the number of times I have worn a suit and tie in the last twenty years,' he said. 'The last time was the coronial enquiry into the Gwardar robbery. I had to go out and buy a tie, get my old blue suit dry-cleaned. Thankfully it still fitted.'

Paulo opened the wardrobe door and showed him his reflection in the full length mirror, and he saw himself in the black suit as he had appeared at his mother's funeral the year before he'd left London. The image came to him again of his wife at the morgue, and he pictured himself by her grave, some sandy hole in the Australian dirt, his daughter standing beside him holding his hand, and he had to turn away. He cursed at himself, angry for letting that sneak up on him, forgetting why he was going through with Paulo's game. He seized on his anger and he twisted it, turned it against Paulo and his family. When he turned back to the mirror he had recovered himself and was smiling.

'*Très soigné,*' said Paulo.

Ford let him close the door on the mirror before he said. 'Why is Robert opening a casino here? I would have thought Vegas would be better.'

'My father's history precludes him from getting a licence in Las Vegas,' said Paulo. 'They spent so long getting the Mafia out of that town, that they are very wary of the Chinese. Perth is in the same time zone, and closer to Macau. The casino is a *pied-à-terre* to allow Robert to develop his shipping and mining interests.'

'Your father's history doesn't cause a problem here?'

'Australian's aren't so fussy. Perhaps it is your convict heritage. It is easy enough to overcome any problems.'

'By getting McCann to front the casino?'

Paulo pushed back the shelf of shoes and fussed with the tie rack until the remaining ties were arranged to his satisfaction. 'Are you familiar with the Chinese concept of *guanxi*?' he said.

Ford shook his head, so Paulo continued. 'It is the network of personal friendships, business relationships, favours given and accrued. In China a person's success is defined by these relationships. Patti is a master of it. To Patti, every single person occupies a specific place in the elaborately constructed social universe in her mind. Within thirty seconds of meeting another Asian and learning their name, she will do complex social arithmetic in her head and calculate precisely where they stand in her cosmos based on family, relatives, net worth, how their fortunes have been secured, and any dirt that she might have on them. It's all about leverage, or social capital.'

'And the wedding is part of it?'

'The wedding is only the start of it. It will be Patti's way into Perth society. She will then make use of all McCann's contacts: politicians, businessmen. They will all be there this evening.'

‘All those hustlers in business suits, the boosters and the racketeers? The sort of snakes that McCann hangs around with?’

‘I believe he is friends with the mayor. I’m told she is very pro-development.’

‘Her husband is a property developer. She did a few favours for him and McCann with the planning department.’

‘So you see how it works?’

‘You can give it a fancy name. Here we call it cronyism, corruption, or graft. Don’t let Perth’s aura of manufactured innocence and conservatism fool you, this city has been corrupt since Governor Stirling got off the boat with the first settlers and granted himself and his cronies all the best land. I’m sure McCann would call it good old Australian mateship.’

‘I wouldn’t call McCann and my brother mates. If McCann allows Robert to put money into his company to re-float it, Robert will push him out, dilute his shares until he can get his hands on the iron ore reserves.’

‘Well, they’ll both need some mates in government, because the big mining companies certainly have, and they will have their eye on McCann’s iron ore. They’ll want him to stay in receivership until the leases expire, then put pressure on the politicians to keep the iron ore out of foreign ownership. But that doesn’t concern you, does it? You’re more worried about Robert getting more control over the business.’

Paulo didn’t answer. He checked his watch and went to the bedroom door and opened it. ‘We should go and join my sister,’ he said.

‘Is that why we’re here? To drive a wedge between your brother and McCann?’

‘You said you were here to find your wife’s killer. We are simply helping you do that.’

‘I found him. It’s Zhou. I feel sure of that now.’

‘And you plan to kill him?’

'I never suggested that.'

'Anyone who speaks badly of revenge never lost anything important.'

'So this is just sport for you? Watching Kavanagh and me front up to Zhou?'

'It's so wonderfully Jacobean, don't you think?'

Ford smiled. 'If you want us to kill him for you, you should have let us keep the gun.'

**18.**

When Ford stepped out from the bedroom with Paulo, Singh was standing waiting for them in the living room, silent and motionless as a statue. Only his eyes moved, turning downwards to the floor in acknowledgement of their arrival. ‘The ladies are still getting ready,’ he said.

‘Isn’t that always the way?’ said Ford.

‘Ask them to join us in the penthouse when they are ready,’ said Paulo, and went to the front door, holding it open for Ford. The Gurkha was still in the corridor, standing with his hands behind his back, his eyes moving slowly under his hooded lids, following them as they walked to the lift. The doors opened as soon as Paulo put his security card to the panel on the wall, and he waved Ford into the lift. Singh stepped in behind both of them and pressed the highest button and the lift swept upwards.

When the doors chimed open they walked out into a corridor identical to the one they had just left, except there was soft jazz playing, accompanied by the hum of voices. Ford could smell a bar, the mixture of alcohol and cigar smoke in the air, and he instinctively turned towards it. The door at the end of the corridor was closed, but the buzz of the crowd could be heard through it. Between him and the door was another metal detector, and beside it two hotel staff in the high collared tunics of the hotel. Ford strode confidently behind Singh through the arch, trying not to look like he was listening for a beep, and when they reached the door Singh opened it.

As he walked through it Ford felt himself immersed in the noise and the smells and the thick air of the VIP Room. The alcohol and cigar smoke was now mixed with a blend of expensive perfumes, the air both bitter and sweet, cloying and heavy on his tongue. The lighting in the room was low and it took his eyes a moment to adjust before he could take in his surroundings. The room was the same size as the twins’ suite below,

but without the dividing walls to the bedrooms, making a single large salon. Glass surrounded him on three sides, the low lighting designed to minimize reflection and allow views out to the river and the city. The sun had set now and the lights from the city bled into the room. The river was a dark ribbon snaking between the lights, and Ford could see traffic moving on the Narrows Bridge.

Nearest to him was an island bar with two bartenders marooned inside it, pretty young blond women in matching red tunics busy mixing cocktails. The rattle of the ice blending into the click of casino chips from the three gaming tables beyond.

The music was coming from a white grand piano in the furthest corner of the room, in the angle where the plate glass windows met. Ford could see the pianist reflected in both windows, and for a moment he thought that it was Sofia until she lifted her eyes from the keyboard and he saw that she was older, her brown hair pulled back from her face. She was playing jazz, something by Bill Evans, Ford thought. Beside the piano was a microphone stand.

‘You weren’t joking about karaoke,’ he said.

Paulo smiled. ‘Nobody has yet persuaded Patti that she’s not allowed to sing. Anybody who doesn’t applaud doesn’t get invited here again.’

‘Where is she?’

‘She’s at the blackjack table, in the red dress, with the hair.’

Ford could see her now, sat in the end chair, ignoring the dealer and talking with two middle-aged women playing at the table. Her head was crowned with a shock of black hair, teased upwards and sculpted into punk peaks held aloft by hair lacquer that shone as she moved her head under the light that hung above the table. Ford looked at the wrinkles on her face, her cheeks sagging, and guessed her age at more than sixty, too old to pull off the hair and the dress. She was a short woman and the red embroidered cheongsam that she wore was bunched around her middle and opened

wide at the neck to show her cleavage. As she sat on the high chair her feet didn't touch the ground, the high heels of her gold shoes hooked on the rung six inches off the carpet. She conducted the conversation with her hands, her long red nails clawing at the air, then threw her head back and laughed at something she had said, her cackle cutting through the hum of noise in the room.

'Where's her son?' asked Ford.

'He'll be around here somewhere.' Paulo pointed to a door in the wall, near to where they had come in. 'He has an office there. He'll come out every thirty minutes or so and walk the room. Glad hand the high-rollers, make sure they're being looked after.'

The table beyond the blackjack was crowded with Chinese people, both men and women, of all ages. The men wore suits, one or two in dinner jackets, and the women were in evening gowns and cocktail dresses. Half of them were smoking. There was a harsh buzz of conversation at the table, mostly in Chinese, but Ford couldn't tell if it was Cantonese or Mandarin. Above the dealer's head a computer screen was suspended from the ceiling, displaying a matrix of red, blue and green circles marked with Chinese characters. Paulo read the confusion in Ford's eyes.

'Baccarat,' he said. 'Played the Chinese way, Punto Banco.'

Ford stepped around the blackjack table, avoiding eye contact with Patti, and looked over the heads of the crowd at the play on the table. He watched two hands before he returned to Paulo's side.

'It's a straight fifty-fifty bet on the Bank or the player. Where's the fun in that?'

Paulo smiled. 'Punto Banco baccarat requires no skill, which is why the Chinese like it. The computer records the history of wins and losses in proceeding hands, and the lengths of any winning streaks. Players have systems that determine the most favourable play in the next hand based on the patterns they see there. They change incrementally as each hand is played, measuring the winds of change. Your western eye



can't read the figures at all, can't discern the patterns. It's in a language that is not meant for you.'

'The cards have no memory,' said Ford. 'Nobody ever calls it 'smart luck' do they?'

'To the Chinese, luck flows one way and then the other,' said Paulo. 'Nature seeks equilibrium. Those who follow the Tao continually look beyond the present reality in an attempt to perceive the seeds of change. They have faith in the laws that demonstrate that all reality is a process of change, and all processes cycle in the direction of their opposite. From life to death, positive to negative, energy to matter and back again.'

'And yet the house still wins.'

'The house rake is lower in Punto Banco than in any other table game,' said Paulo. 'Another reason it appeals to the Chinese. Pragmatism and superstition always walk hand-in-hand for the Chinese.' He turned around and raised his hand to attract the attention of the bartender, who smiled at him and bowed her head. 'Drink?' he asked Ford.

'Yeah, make it something simple and significant.'

'I'd say we're approaching time for a martini.'

'Excellent,' said Ford, catching the eye of the bartender. 'Make mine very dry. Just let the shadow of the vermouth bottle pass across the glass. And two olives.'

She smiled at him and nodded, and he watched her rinse the glasses in vermouth, shake the gin over ice, then pour it into the glasses. She deftly skewered two olives on a cocktail stick and rested it in the glass, then did it again for the second drink. She presented both glasses on the bar with a deep bow of her head.

Ford sipped at his glass, enjoying the rush of the pure spirit as it hit his stomach. He turned slowly to look at the room again. Beyond the blackjack and the baccarat was the poker table, a standard oval ten-seater with the dealer sat on the far side facing him, her back to the windows, the river and the lights of the south bank spread behind her.

The crowd around the baccarat table obscured his view so Ford stepped to one side to see the table and the players more clearly.

Alan McCann was sitting beside the dealer, by her right hand in the number ten seat. McCann was looking down at the table to where his hands shielded his hole cards while he turned the corner of them to look. He looked thinner than the last time Ford had seen him, nearly two years now since they had faced each other in McCann's private aircraft hangar, McCann climbing the steps to his jet with Ford's wife. He'd expected McCann to have put on weight in that time, shacked up inside the Laus' casino in Macau and living off room service and restaurant meals. He was too big to ever look skinny, but where he used to be barrel-chested and full in the gut, his torso now seemed to hang off his broad shoulders. He had lost the roundness in his face, his cheekbones showing where his face used to be fleshy. His hair looked finer and greyer and he seemed to have aged more than two years.

The dealer dealt the flop, three cards face up on the table. McCann checked his hole cards again and even at distance, unable to see McCann's eyes, Ford could see the slight tightening of McCann's shoulders, then watched them rise and fall as his breathing increased, and Ford could tell he held good cards. He allowed himself a smile, looking forward to playing against someone with so little control over his body.

Ford realised his own pulse had quickened and his breathing had got shallower. It wasn't the excitement of the coming game, it was a reaction to seeing McCann again. He had waited so long for it, and now he was here he wasn't sure if it was an anticlimax. He had expected a surge of hate, but that wasn't what was making his heart pound, it was a basic flight or fight reaction, primeval and raw. Now that all the players were in one place, he knew that this was the only decision left to him, and he had thought about his wife and about Alannah Doyle and decided to fight.

He now looked past McCann to the other people around the table. Standing off to one side, near the windows and silhouetted against the city lights, Henk Roth was staring at him. He stepped forward now that Ford had seen him, stepping into the pool of light that surrounded the poker table. He looked no different to the last time they had met in Marble Bar, still tall and athletic, the strong jaw and the hawk eyes, the hair in the same military flat-top, greying at the temples. He wore a charcoal suit, cut to hug his figure, his shirt crisp white and his green striped tie immaculate. Ford wondered how long he had been standing in the shadows watching him like that. Roth didn't seem surprised to see him, his expression was more of amusement. He raised his hand to his forehead in mock salute, showing Ford the missing fingers on his right hand, his mouth twisting to one side in a smirk.

Ford took another sip from his drink and maintained eye contact with Roth, controlling his breathing, forcing down his heart rate, treating the situation as if he'd just flopped a full house, not wanting to give away any signs either of strength or weakness.

Roth turned back towards the shadows by the window and a woman stepped out and leaned in close to him and spoke. She was tall and slender, and she turned to look at Ford and her eyes met his. They were large and brown, ringed with heavy eyeliner, and set within an oval face of olive skin, framed by ringlets of dark curly hair that had fallen loose from where it had been pinned behind her head. She smiled at Ford and then turned back to talk to Roth and said something that made him laugh.

Ford looked around the room again and this time he noticed the women. There were at least half a dozen of them, all young and tall like her, most of them blond, all of them dressed expensively and standing behind the shoulder of an older Chinese man playing at the tables. They wore the same blank expression, a half-smile that did little to hide their obvious boredom.

Paulo followed his gaze. ‘Russians,’ he said. ‘Robert brings them down from Vladivostok and Khabarovsk. They do a few months in Macau and then a few here, entertaining the high rollers.’

‘Escorts?’

‘Robert calls them hostesses.’

‘They’re stunning.’

‘Only the best for our high net worth individuals.’

Ford turned back to the bar and drained his glass. The bartender looked at him and he nodded for another martini. ‘Keep them coming,’ he said. ‘Don’t let me see the bottom of this glass.’ He could feel the first martini, the alcohol mixing with his adrenaline and heightening his appreciation of the lights of the city coming in through the windows. Paulo was still nursing his drink, the level barely changed.

Ford watched the bartender work the cocktail shaker, her wrists syncopated with the jazz coming from the piano. He looked past her elbow, his eye caught by the movement of the entrance door opening, and he watched as Kavanagh and Sofia Lau walked into the room.

He had never seen Kavanagh in a dress before, and couldn’t remember ever seeing her in anything except jeans and a T-shirt. He had never even wondered what she might look like in evening clothes. When his imagination did wander, he only ever found himself thinking about her naked in a bare room in Marble Bar, moonlight filtered through storm shutters and reflecting of the film of sweat on her body. Now that he saw her in the black cocktail dress, he knew he would always picture her wearing it.

She had stopped just inside the door and was looking around the room. At first he thought she might be looking for him, but then saw that she was trying to catalogue the people in the room, assessing any threats, counting the exits, her cop brain still

working. She took a few more steps into the room, unsteady on her heels, not used to putting one foot directly in front of the other. When her eyes swept the room again they landed on Ford and when she saw him she smiled. It was a look of relief, joy to see a familiar face, but then she realised the absurdity of the situation and blushed, dropping her eyes to the floor. Then she recovered herself, pulled herself upright, letting the low heels of her shoes push her back into an elegant curve. She strode towards him with her best impersonation of a catwalk strut, throwing him a big Marilyn Monroe pout with her chin up and her eyes hooded, giving her hips all the roll she could manage without falling off her heels. When she reached him she leaned close to his ear and whispered, 'Well?'

'You've changed,' said Ford. 'These clothes, you look like a different person.'

'It's only a cover while I change into something else.'

'You don't mean clothes.'

'No, more like changing my skin, my identity.'

'What do you think you're going to turn into?'

'I don't know.'

'You're different every time I see you.'

'So are you,' she said. 'You're smiling'

'I'm having fun.'

'Should you be?'

Ford thought about that. 'What we're doing is something serious, our motive, but how we go about it is something else. How we look at it, our attitude. If they want to make a game of this, then we might as well enjoy it.'

Ford nodded towards the other end of the room. 'McCann is at the poker table,' he said. 'Roth is with him.'

Kavanagh pouted again and put her hand on her hip. 'Don't make me fish for a compliment.'

Ford laughed. 'You're a knockout. Is all this for me?'

'Fuck, no,' she said. 'No woman dresses for a man. We dress for ourselves. That's what Sofia tells me, and who am I to disagree?'

Ford had been watching Kavanagh so intently that he had not noticed Sofia. She arrived now, and Ford's attention was pulled to the red diamond nestled in the hollow of her neck below her throat. It was in a simple white gold setting on a fine chain choker, the depth of colour enhanced by the contrast with Sofia's pale skin and white clothes. Sofia saw him looking and stepped into the lights by the bar, turning her neck from side to side to make the stone sparkle.

'It looks like a tiny strawberry floating in a glass of milk,' said Ford.

'Or a drop of blood,' said Kavanagh.

Sofia smiled at this. 'You'll have to excuse our tardiness. We had to wait for the jeweller to bring me this, and then I had to find a lipstick the exact same shade of red.' She licked her lips and threaded her arm around Kavanagh's waist. They stood together looking at Ford, perfect opposites, black dress against white trouser suit, Kavanagh's white hair against Sofia's black bob.

'Yin and yang, don't you think?' said Sofia and then giggled behind her hand.

Ford stared at Kavanagh, wanting to touch her, run his hands over familiar places, the feel of her ribs, her stomach sucked in, slim legs around him, see her pale skin in the dark and run his fingers over her tattoos, knowing where they were beneath the tight dress she was wearing. He liked the way she was looking back at him.

'Can I get you ladies a drink?' he asked.

Kavanagh looked at the drink in his hand. 'I thought you were playing cards?' she said. 'Don't you need to be sharp?'

Ford raised a hand to the bartender and signalled for two more martinis. 'For the first hour of play I won't be doing much, just watching the other players, working out how they play. By the time I'm ready to change gear I'll be sober and they'll think I'm drunk.'

Kavanagh was looking around the room, stepping sideways to get a good look at McCann and Roth. Then she was taking in the piano and the gaming tables, checking out how the other women were dressed. She attracted the eyes of the players at the baccarat table, three of the men in tuxedos had turned to watch her walk in the room. She stared right back at them until the croupier got their attention and they turned back to the game.

'Fancy place,' she said.

Ford handed her a martini. 'It's like every other gambling joint I've ever been in. Liquor in the front, poker in the rear. Very classy.'

Kavanagh let her shoulders sag theatrically, but Sofia giggled. Ford gave her a martini and found himself looking at the colour of her lipstick. 'Did you ever notice something about casinos?' he said. 'You never hear laughter. You rarely even see people smiling, especially the Chinese. You see it in the ads and in the movies, people jumping up and down, the crowd of punters gathering around the guy on a winning streak. You could live for a week in a casino and never see it.'

'Have you done that?' asked Kavanagh. 'Lived in a casino?'

Ford sipped at his drink and thought about it. 'I did once, you know,' he said. 'Long time ago, in a place called Laughlin in Nevada. Only because the rooms were cheap and there was this huge buffet. They don't do that in Perth. They don't keep the rooms and the food cheap and the drinks free to keep the punters at the tables. It's the lack of competition.'

‘This isn’t the Perth casino,’ said Sofia. Her face had changed, her mouth now a pout of irritation, but the result was the same, Ford was still looking at her lips. ‘This is a private room. No slot machines and no steak dinners here.’

‘And everyone can smoke,’ said Ford. ‘It’s like the law doesn’t apply here.’

Kavanagh snorted. ‘You don’t want to start down that slippery slope.’

‘This place is still all coloured lights and red carpet, and it’s dirty like a circus. Everything is soiled. When the lights come up you’re in a painted tent full of wet sawdust and horse shit.’

‘I thought you were a gambler, Mr Ford,’ said Sofia, her irritation gone now, her calm smile returned.

‘I am,’ said Ford. ‘The location doesn’t matter. It could be a private VIP room in a casino or a donga on a mine site with a dozen sweaty blokes. Once the game starts I’m looking at my cards and at the players across the table and the surroundings become irrelevant.’

‘The stakes are a little higher here,’ said Kavanagh. She was looking towards Roth again, a frown on her face when she saw the woman he was talking to. Ford was looking at the diamond around Sofia’s neck, trying to pull himself back into the situation.

‘Where is Zhou?’ he said.

The smile left Sofia’s face and she turned to survey the room. Paulo did the same, and as their heads turned they eventually came to be looking at each other, and Ford saw the silent message that passed between their eyes.

‘He’s at the poker table,’ said Paulo. ‘Sitting opposite the dealer with his back to us.’

Ford had not noticed him, just the back of his head visible from the bar if he stepped to look through the crowd, just black hair above a black dinner jacket, looking no different from behind than the knot of Chinese men at the baccarat table. Ford stepped to one side so he could see Zhou, recognising him now, the pockmarked skin, the fixed



smile showing yellow teeth. He was in the number five seat, diagonally across from McCann.

An elegant older woman sat opposite him at the dealers' left hand in the first seat. She had big hair streaked blond and blow-waved, a brown silk dress hanging off slender shoulders, gold jewellery set off against tanned skin, a heavy chain around her neck and heavy bangles on her arms. Ford knew her face from the newspaper. Her husband had died two years earlier, leaving his construction company in her hands, and she had been a regular on the social pages ever since, courted by a series of rich men and young handsome gold diggers. As she folded her cards a diamond on her right hand caught the light, at least twice the size as the stone around Sofia's neck.

Next to her, sitting at the end of the table, was a stout bald man, his chair pushed back to give room for his belly, which strained against his crimson cummerbund. Ford knew his face but could not remember his name, something Slavic perhaps, with a fortune from mining. His face was sunburned, but the top of his head was white, a sharp tide mark across his face showing the limit of the shade provided by his hard hat when on site. The man looked at his hole cards, blew out his cheeks in frustration and his cards followed the widow's into the muck pile.

The third seat was empty, but sitting beside Zhou, in the number four seat, was a Chinese man, slim and elegantly dressed, as good-looking as a movie star. Ford remembered what Sofia had told him about Robert's career as a film actor, and wondered whether this man was a contact from that world. He certainly had control of his face, completely impassive as he called McCann's bet, pushing his chips forward with long fingers.

There were two empty chairs to Zhou's left, and then in the eighth chair was another millionaire whose face Ford knew from the papers. A small, wiry man in his early fifties, a narrow face with a weak chin topped by a full head of wavy hair dyed an unnatural

shade of brown. He'd made his money importing mining equipment and enjoyed spending it on a motor racing team, often taking the wheel himself. A tall blonde woman, less than half his age, stood behind him in an elegant cocktail dress that reached only halfway down her long thighs. She was staring at her fingernails and only looked at the racing driver when he called McCann's bet. She looked disappointed, as if it might be money that she may never see again.

Between the racing driver and McCann was a small plump Chinese man, round in face and body, his hair receding from a broad forehead. Ford thought that if he'd been smiling he would have looked like a laughing Buddha, but his poker face made him look more like Chairman Mao.

'Where are Zhou's men?' asked Ford. 'I don't imagine he'd be without protection.'

Paulo swivelled his eyes towards the bar. 'There's two *mai jai* sitting at the bar.'

Ford looked past Paulo's shoulder at the men in shiny grey silk suits sitting at the furthest corner of the bar. They were both nursing a glass of beer from which the head had long since gone flat. Ford saw the tattoos on their hands and when he checked their faces he thought the taller man might have been Zhou's driver at the caravan. He wasn't wearing his sunglasses now, but the slicked-back hair was the same, and he was chewing on a toothpick and trying to exude cool. The man beside him was huge: wide in the shoulders and fat in the belly, his dimpled cheeks plump like a child's. He watched a waitress walk past with a tray of canapés and beckoned to her. He said something to her in Cantonese and she put the tray down on the bar in front of him. He started eating them mechanically, starting at the near side of the platter and working his way across.

'The big man they call Bao,' said Paulo. 'The poser with the toothpick is Fung.'

Singh appeared beside Sofia carrying a tray of poker chips. He passed them to Sofia and she presented them to Ford.

‘Are you ready to play now?’ she asked.

‘I was born ready,’ said Ford, taking the chips, his eyes running over them, doing a tally.

‘Three million,’ said Sofia. ‘For the diamond.’

‘It’s not a sale, it’s only collateral.’

‘Unless you lose,’ said Sofia. ‘I’m a little torn as to whether I want you to win or not.’ Her hand went to her throat and her fingers caressed the stone.

Kavanagh leaned close to him and whispered ‘Good luck,’ in his ear. ‘What do I do for the next few hours while you’re playing ‘highest up the wall’ with McCann and Zhou?’

‘Go mention Alannah’s name to a few people and see if they blink,’ said Ford. ‘Go find Robert, or maybe see if you can light the fuse on Patti’s tampon.’

Kavanagh laughed and looked at the chips. ‘It’s a hell of a lot of money.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ford. ‘Poker is a very expensive cheap thrill.’

**19.**

Ford let Sofia carry the tray of chips, holding it out in front of her like a silver service tea tray, and walking with her head high and her back arched as she led him to the poker table. He stayed three paces behind her, watching the faces of the players at the tables as they passed. Most of them seem to know Sofia, nodding to her in acknowledgement. Their eyes narrowed when they saw Ford, not sure what to make of him, or why Sofia should be acting like a one of the staff for him. He enjoyed the confusion in their faces, following their eyes as they moved over the stack of chips, trying to calculate how much was there.

Sofia led him to the table on McCann's side, and then around behind the dealer, passing in front of Roth. McCann looked up briefly from his cards, his face clouded, his eyebrows pushed together, an expression of sorrow more than surprise or anger at seeing Ford. Roth was smiling, enjoying the little procession. He leaned over to the tall woman beside him and whispered in her ear and they both laughed.

Sofia stopped at the number three seat at the end of the table, between the Fat Man and the Movie Star. She laid the tray on the table and then pulled out the chair for Ford to sit. Ford took his place and started stacking the chips on the table in front of him. He ran his fingertips over the green felt and the padded rail around the edge: fine leather, stitched by hand.

The chips were better quality than he had used before, a heavier weight that felt good in his hand. They were marked in denominations starting at ten and leading up to one hundred, and he realised they must be in thousands. He told himself to ignore the zeroes, to play the chips as if he was playing a dollar home game, and to bet proportional to the pot and to his stack. He had half a million in small chips, and then five large red rectangular plaques marked as five hundred thousand.

He looked around the table and checked the other players' stacks. The Fat Man on his right was down to less than a half million, and by the way he was sweating he wouldn't last long short stacked. The Widow was doing better, with a stack of two million. The Movie Star on Ford's left seemed to have the minimum buy-in of one million, neither losing or adding to his stack. He looked at Ford and smiled, showing off expensive dental work and the sort of a smile that earned him a lot of money on screen and got him a lot of women off it. It didn't do much for Ford.

Zhou sat on the next seat, and had not so much turned his head to look at Ford. His stack was slightly more than two million. Ford watched Zhou's hands as he aligned his chips in two perfect towers, broad hands with stubby fingers, the knuckles ridged and gnarled with scars and calluses like the roots of an old tree.

Zhou's bespoke suit didn't disguise the athleticism of his body, but it was his eyes that sent a chill through Ford, so black that the pupils disappeared into the irises. He was staring at the dealer, with a smile on his face, but his black eyes were not smiling. Only his fingers playing with his chips letting the dealer know he was impatient for the next hand to be dealt.

The Racing Driver was down to one chip, a red plaque worth half a million, and he was tapping it on the edge of the table, looking at the dealer.

The guy at the opposite end of the table, who looked like Chairman Mao, was the chip leader, his stack twice as big as anyone else at the table. Ford guessed it at six million. Whatever the short-stacked players had lost, he had added to his pile, but it still didn't add up. There must have been players who had already lost their stack to him and left the table. Mao looked bored and sleepy, but that only spelled danger to Ford, because with such control of his face only his betting patterns would give Ford any information.

McCann was diagonally opposite him on his right, on the far side of the dealer. He had a couple of black plaques marked at a million, plus two stacks of smaller chips, which Ford estimated at being equal to his own stack. He tried to catch McCann's eye but he was looking over his head at Sofia, and the expression in his eyes told Ford that McCann had noticed the red diamond. Sofia took a step forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. Ford looked at the perfect manicure and then turned his head to look up at her. Her eyes were locked on McCann, and she had lifted her chin, extending her neck in a graceful arc to ensure the stone was not in the shadow of her chin. She moved her head from side to side like the mating dance of a swan, making the stone sparkle in the lights shining down on the table.

The dealer extended her arm across the table and drummed her fingers on the felt to get Ford's attention. 'The game is Texas Hold'em, no limit. Minimum buy-in is one million dollars and you can re-buy at any time. Blinds are ten and twenty thousand. Please put in an ante equal to the big blind.' Ford tossed forward two of his smallest chips and the dealer briskly dealt each player two cards. The dealer button was in front of Zhou, and McCann called the blind. The Widow and the Fat Man both folded. Ford put his hands over his cards and turned up the corners to see a seven and eight of diamonds. He saw it as a good omen that he would not have to fold his first hand, and so he raised, and watched as the Movie Star folded. Zhou called, the Racing Driver and Mao folded and when it got to McCann he called. The dealer laid out the flop: two and eight of clubs and the king of hearts. It gave Ford a small pair, but no more diamonds and no straight draw. McCann raised sixty thousand and Ford knew he had at least a king, and so he threw in his cards. Zhou raised to a hundred and twenty and as soon as his chips hit the table McCann reraised to two hundred and forty. Zhou thought for a few seconds, looking at the three cards face up on the table, then he folded. Ford was pleased. He now knew from the very first hand that McCann liked to play from the

front, and it was as he'd expected. The reraise told Ford he had two pairs, or maybe a set of twos. He was a bully, and he only bet when he had a made hand that he was confident was the strongest at the table. In the following hands, if Ford were to bet into him, then McCann would come over the top, so Ford decided to play possum, just let him lead out, limp in behind him, and wait for his opening.

Ford's next two cards arrived and he looked at them, a nine and a three unsuited. He folded them when his turn came, and used the opportunity to watch the other players. When the flop came, there was a pair of nines and an ace, and Ford made sure his face did not betray his disappointment at throwing away his nine. The Fat Man beside him didn't have the same control, his eyes widening, his fingers fidgeting with his cards, telling Ford he had the other nine and Ford felt relieved, knowing if he had bet his nines the Fat Man would probably have a better kicker. Chairman Mao bet sixty, and The Fat Man checked his cards again and then raised him to one twenty. They were the only players left in the hand when the dealer showed the turn card, a four, which helped neither of them. Mao checked, the Fat Man bet, and Mao called him without expression. The river card was the ace of spades and Ford could sense the big man behind him slacken, his weight went onto his elbows and Ford felt the table move. Mao raised a single red plaque of half a million, seeing that his opponent was down to his last five hundred, forcing him to go all-in if he wanted to see his cards. The Fat Man stared at the pot. Ford knew it didn't really matter if the Chinese man had an ace or not, the big man beside him was beaten and he knew it. The Fat Man looked at his cards one more time, as if they might have changed, and when he saw that they were the same he sighed and folded his hand.

This hand confirmed to Ford that Mao was the danger at the table, happy to bet into a paired board and use his big stack to chase from behind, and he could bluff if he needed to.

In the next hand Ford was dealt the king and five of diamonds, and he limped in for a flop that gave him two more diamonds, the jack and three, along with the queen of clubs. The Widow bet first and the Fat Man, Ford and Zhou called her. Ford looked across the table to gauge McCann's reaction to the flop. He was counting his chips and Ford knew he was hesitant about calling. In the end he folded.

The tall woman with the curly hair was standing behind him now, her eyes slowly sweeping the room. Ford wondered if she was looking for Roth, and he looked around the room himself before he heard his South African accent behind him.

'Are you really going to put your head in the lions' mouth?' said Roth, his voice barely above a whisper, his clipped consonants cutting through the murmur of voices and music in the room.

'Who's the lion?' asked Ford. 'McCann? He's certainly betting like a lion, thinking he's king of the jungle, bullying us with his big stack. He should be less of the lion and more of the fox.'

McCann glanced up from his cards at the sound of his name. He looked at Ford and then at Roth and then cast his eyes back down to the table.

'I didn't mean Alan,' said Roth. 'Maybe I should have said it's the dragon's mouth that your head is inside. Sharper teeth, and a risk of fire.'

'Are you talking about Robert and his mother?'

'I'm talking about the twins. They are far more dangerous than Patti will ever be.'

'What's your role in all this?' asked Ford. 'I stopped thinking you were just McCann's bodyguard after you let us take the gold in Marble Bar.'

Ford heard a slight sigh of exasperation from Roth. 'Why are you here Ford?'

'This is the only way I could get to see McCann. He's been locked inside a casino since the last time I saw him.'



'You're looking in the wrong direction if you think Alan had anything to do with your wife's death. He was as devastated by it as you were. He holds himself responsible.'

'That's two of us, then,' said Ford. 'Who's the tall girl?'

'Her name is Yana.'

'Russian?'

'Israeli.'

'One of Robert's girls?'

'No,' said Roth. 'One of mine.'

There were four people in the hand for the turn, which was the queen of spades, which paired the board. They all checked around to Zhou, and when he bet only the Fat Man and Ford called it. Ford had put Zhou on a pair, most likely queens or jacks. With a paired board there was always the possibility of a full house but Ford calculating that the pot odds still made it worth his while to draw to his flush.

Ford looked at Zhou, who was watching the Fat Man, the smile still locked on his face. He could hear Roth breathing behind him, and knew he was looking at Zhou too, thinking about what Ford had told him.

'There's a limit to how much I can help you here,' said Roth. 'You may have got yourself in too deep.'

When Ford turned around to look at him he had already stepped away, walking back around the table. He pulled aside the woman he'd called Yana and spoke in her ear. They looked over at Zhou together and Ford thought about that until the dealer brought his attention back to the game.

The river card was the king of hearts. Ford missed his flush but hit top pair but he knew it wouldn't be enough. The Fat Man checked and so did Ford, waiting to see what Zhou would do. Zhou raised, the Fat Man called him, going all in, and Ford folded.

They showed, the Fat Man had a queen but Zhou showed pocket Jacks to win with a full house, the smile on his face getting slightly wider.

The Fat Man sighed loudly and picked up his drink, swirling the ice cubes around the glass, looking down into it as if he could somehow read the reasons for his bad luck in the bottom of it. Ford knew it wasn't bad luck. He had put Zhou on a full house at the turn and his bet on the river had broadcast it. If the Fat Man had not been able to read that, he was slow-playing a set of queens into a paired board, and if he was that dumb then he didn't deserve to keep his money and it was the duty of the other players to take it off him.

The widow leaned over and laid a hand over the Fat Man's chubby wrist and whispered, 'That was a bad beat,' she cooed, but she caught Ford's eye and he knew she didn't mean it. She had read the hand as clearly as Ford and was regretting that she had not been the one to take his money. Only the Fat Man had thought that Zhou was bluffing.

The Fat Man stood up with a groan, the table moving as he levered himself upright. He took his empty glass and headed over to the bar. Ford watched him go and caught Kavanagh watching him over the rim of her glass. She winked at him and turned around to say something to Sofia.

When Ford turned his attention back to the table McCann was sitting in the chair next to him, stacking his chips in front of him. Up close he appeared tired, the skin around his eyes hanging loose. He looked ravaged and older than his years, with the air of someone who had been through something that hadn't killed him, but hadn't made him any stronger either.

The dealer had her hand stretched towards McCann as he settled himself into his new seat. 'You can rejoin the game after the button,' she said, and McCann nodded.

He leaned towards Ford, and whispered, 'My deepest condolences for your loss.'

Ford said nothing. The dealer put the button in front of the Widow and dealt the hole cards. Ford looked at them: a seven and a five off suit, and left them on the table and tossed one chip onto the table for his blind.

‘I thought you wanted to talk to me?’ said McCann.

‘No,’ said Ford. ‘I said I wanted to see you. I wanted to see for myself how deep you are with the Lau family.’

By the time the bet got back to Ford only the Widow had called, and so he limped in and the Movie Star in the big blind checked.

‘I hadn’t seen Diane since she left Macau. I heard she was living with you again.’

‘We were living together. In our house. The one we were in before she met you. The house my daughter grew up in.’

‘I need you to know that I am as devastated by her death as you are.’

‘And yet we’re both here, playing cards like we’re having fun.’

The flop hit the table, a four and a six of clubs and the queen of diamonds. Ford liked his open-ended straight draw, but was worried by the queen. He checked, and the Movie Star made a small raise, but not enough to suggest he’d paired the queen. The widow dropped out, so Ford raised by the size of the pot. The Movie Star called, and they were now head-to-head.

‘It was you who dragged Diane into this world,’ said Ford, trying to keep his voice calm, aware that any show of anger might give the other player an edge. ‘You set off the chain of events that led to her death. You might not think it is your fault, but I do.’

The turn card was the five of spades, no help to him. Ford checked and so did the Movie Star.

‘That’s a long chain of blame you’ve made,’ said McCann.

‘It’s a long trail of dead bodies,’ said Ford. ‘From Kalgoorlie to Marble Bar, and back to Perth. They are toppling like dominoes, and you pushed the first one over.’

The river card was the nine of clubs, and Ford had his straight, but he was wary of the flush. The Movie Star had stiffened, his back straight. Ford made a modest bet, tempting him to raise him if he had the flush, but the Movie Star simply called, and when Ford showed him the straight he mucked his cards with a flamboyant flick of his wrist.

‘Nice hand,’ said McCann. ‘You know the Chinese don’t believe in causality? When things happen in sequence, it’s just synchronicity to them, caused by luck.’

‘Is that why you went to Macau?’ said Ford, watching the dealer stack the chips from the pot and realising that she was not taking a rake for the house. ‘Did you think that a change of philosophy would cleanse your conscience of responsibility?’

McCann looked at the stack of chips in front of Ford, a little taller now for having won a hand. ‘Have you ever played for such high stakes before?’

Ford looked at him sideways. ‘I’ve been playing for the highest possible stakes since Roth and his goons left me for dead in the desert after the Gwardar robbery. They got raised again when Diane died.’ He knocked over the tallest stack of chips, spreading them across the green felt. ‘This is only money,’ he said.

‘Easy to say that when it’s not your own,’ said McCann.

The dealer put the button in front of Ford and the cards spun across the table from the dealer for the next hand. McCann looked at his cards and said, ‘I saw the diamond at that bitch’s throat. What else of mine did you steal from Marble Bar?’

‘Just the diamonds,’ said Ford. He checked his cards and saw a pair of fives.

‘You sold The Phoenix to the twins? I could have given you a better price to return it.’

‘I didn’t sell it. It’s just collateral for the card game.’

‘So you’re playing me with my own money? You’ve got some balls.’

‘Do you consider the stone yours? You bought it with your shareholders’ money. You’re in receivership, so the diamond belongs to your creditors.’

The bet came around to them. McCann folded and Ford called.

‘I’ll be back in business soon,’ said McCann, pulling himself upright in his chair, puffing out his chest, summoning up whatever resources of bravado he still had left. ‘We’ve got money to put to the shareholders. We worked all week, we bought most of the debts. I don’t think we’ve got anything to worry about.’

The flop was dealt: an ace, a jack and a seven, all overcards to Ford’s modest pair.

‘You should be worried about Robert and his mother,’ said Ford. ‘They offered Diane safe passage to Australia if she pegged a gold claim for them at Marble Bar. That claim locked you into dealing only with them.’

‘I wish my old Australian partners were that committed. What they were doing is making a commitment, shared objectives. You make it sound like blackmail.’

‘You have a strange concept of partnership.’

‘It’s you who’s picked the wrong partners,’ said McCann. ‘The twins have already lost the battle. Robert is the one positioned to take over the family when the old man is gone. He’s the one with vision and ambition. The twins are effete wankers. They think they are cosmopolitan and elegant and that their clothes define them but they are off pretending to be French or Portuguese or Euro-fucking-asian, and denying the best part of their Chinese heritage.’

‘They seem like a fusion of both.’

The Widow bet sixty thousand and he read that as telling him she had a pair with one of the overcards on the board, and Ford was happy to believe her and fold.

‘The Chinese are natural businessmen,’ said McCann. ‘They understand risk and embrace it. They know that business is built on individuals with vision and a network of personal relationships, not by boards and committees, and not by government

regulations. It used to be like that in Australia. You used to look after your mates and rely on them.'

'They call that cronyism,' said Ford.

Only Zhou had called the Widow's bet. The turn card was a five and Ford blinked away his frustration at having mucked a set. To hide his frustration he looked away from the cards, towards the woman called Yana. She was staring right back at him. Zhou checked, the Widow made a continuation bet of sixty and Zhou called again.

'Australia needs to look to the future,' said McCann. 'It needs to let great entrepreneurs like me go out and create a few jobs.'

The river card was a two. Zhou checked to the Widow, and this time she quadrupled the bet, pushing forward a red chip for a quarter million. Zhou looked at her and the board, and he called her. She showed him her pocket twos, making a set with the river card. Zhou puckered his lips before his grin returned and he laid his cards gently face down on the felt.

The Widow smiled at Ford. 'Sometimes you have to take a risk,' she said. 'For me the best policy is a hot dress with a lot of cleavage. That, and a nice smile, usually does the trick.'

Ford smiled back. 'Nice hand,' he said. 'You had me fooled.'

She returned his smile as she collected her chips. 'Darling,' she said, 'if I can fake an orgasm I can raise with a pair of twos.'

Ford laughed, losing himself in the momentary flow of win and loss, but then McCann leaned forward, putting his head between Ford and the Widow, bringing him back into the game.

The cards for the next hand arrived, and when the play reached McCann he tossed a red plaque onto the table, making it cartwheel across the felt, coming to rest in front of the dealer.

'Raise half a million,' he said.

Ford turned his head to look at McCann but he was waiting, his grey eyes fixed on Ford. It was the sort of reckless aggression Ford knew would come, but the timing wasn't right. He didn't like having McCann immediately to his right, and he hated committing too many chips before the flop. There would come a time when McCann was more vulnerable, and he would beat him then, and he was prepared to wait. He gave McCann a face that he hoped conveyed apathy, and folded his cards.

McCann's face was radiant, enjoying his moment. 'In life, in combat, in poker, there is no certainty,' he said. 'There is only likelihood, and the likelihood is that aggression will prevail. You can be bold and risk defeat, or you can be passive and ensure it.'

**20.**

Kavanagh swirled the dregs of her martini around her glass, watching it form an oily film up the side and streak back down in rivulets. She had stretched it out as long as she could and now the gin was warm and she was bored. She wanted another drink but Sofia and Paulo were drinking too slowly and as the drinks had got warmer the conversation had cooled and she had run out of things to say to them. She had tried to steer their small talk to where she could drop Alannah's name, but it was hopeless. They both rolled their eyes and started another anecdote about Paris, or Macau, or the French Riviera, knowing that Kavanagh had nothing to match their stories of artists and dancers and people who owned villas and yachts and went skiing in whichever country the snow happened to be thickest. Kavanagh thought about whether she should move over to the poker table and watch Ford play, but doubted that it would be any less tedious than listening to the twins talk about themselves.

The players at the table were so good at their poker faces that they looked catatonic. Ford had told her that they now televised the big poker tournaments and she wondered if there could be anything less suited to television than a table of people staring into the middle distance, trying to ensure their faces betrayed no emotion. McCann was now sitting next to Ford, and they seemed to be speaking to each other out of the sides of their mouths, their lips barely moving.

She thought she had better do as Ford suggested and try to speak with Robert or his mother, but looking over at Patti she could think of no way to start a conversation. As a cop she could simply have pulled Patti to one side and asked her direct questions, and if she didn't co-operate she could drag her to the station under caution. She suddenly felt the emptiness at the centre of her world, the void left by her career, and with it the fear whether she had the patience to adapt to a world where she had no authority.



She looked again at the poker table. Zhou had his back to her, and nobody behind him. She could walk up to him without being challenged. She could slip the blade from her stocking and stab it into his neck before anyone could react. Slit his throat and push his head down onto the table, watch his blood run out onto the green felt. It could be over so quickly, but if he died then so would her best chance of finding Alannah.

She heard voices raised behind her, high-pitched women's voices yelling shrilly, with the sound of a man's voice trapped within them. She turned and saw that the door to the office behind the bar was open, and in the opening stood a man who could only be Robert Lau. He was better looking than she had imagined, taller than her, with the lithe body of a tennis player, narrow in the hips and long in the limb. He looked more Western than Asian, a strong straight nose, rectangular jaw and geometric cheek bones. Only his almond eyes hinted at his heritage, and his slick black hair, parted on one side with the comb marks clearly visible. He looked angry as he stepped from away from the door, but as soon as he was in the room a group of three women coalesced around him giggling and as soon as he saw them his face changed into a broad smile.

All three women were middle-aged and Chinese, the wives of the high-rollers from the Chinese mainland. They were all over forty and looked it, and Kavanagh figured that Robert must be the same age, but he looked younger. He had only the smallest of wrinkles in his forehead and around his eyes when he smiled. He greeted each of the women in turn, laying a hand on their shoulders and air-kissing each cheek. He flirted with each of them in turn, giving every woman a smile that showed off the dimples in his cheeks. It was practiced and fake, his face working through a series of rehearsed expressions, but the women were lapping it up and Kavanagh felt herself drawn to it too.

When he had given each of them just enough attention to make them blush, he moved through them towards the men they had left behind. They were three old

Chinese men in dinner jackets, their hair badly dyed black, making Kavanagh wonder whether Robert dyed his hair too. He worked the same charm on them, pulling each one to him with a firm handshake, his free hand on their elbow. Kavanagh had seen politicians work a room with the same mechanical charm, but this was something more, the skills of an actor and a playboy added to the cynical manipulation of a politician and businessman. He was attractive and repulsive at the same time.

As he moved away from the door Ellen McCann stepped out of the office. She had tears in her eyes, her face screwed up in anger. She was as thin as the last time Kavanagh had seen her, an emaciated stick figure with barely a curve to her. Her skin was still pale, but there was enough of a flush to her skin to hint that blood might be flowing beneath it, and her hair had been restyled. It was still straight and blond, but no longer punk platinum, now a softer straw colour with streaks of red and brown. She was wearing a red silk cheongsam embroidered in gold, the hemline below the knee and the collar high. The sleeves were long, covering up the tattoos down her arms. Ellen looked around the room, seeming uncomfortable in the crowd, then stepped between the women, keeping far enough behind Robert that she didn't have to be introduced to anybody until she recovered.

They were an odd couple, the movie star and the former junkie bikie chick, and Kavanagh thought about what they might have in common besides a single overbearing parent. Maybe their drug use had brought them together, a common need growing into mutual dependency. Maybe he'd got her off the smack and onto cocaine, moved her up in the world, or perhaps they really did have something special and private that was just their own. Kavanagh could not read them, couldn't tell where the masks of success and wealth ended and the real person began. For all she knew they might be sweet together when they were alone, but right now she didn't care.

Sofia had gone silent, her stream of small talk drying up when Robert had appeared. She looked shy now, put into the shade by her brother's radiance. She was tracking him through the crowd, her mouth smiling but her eyes calculating. She stepped closer to her brother and gently took his hand, lacing her fingers with his and saying something softly in French. She turned to Kavanagh. 'If you would excuse us,' she said. 'We must talk to Robert and make arrangements for our father's arrival. We will introduce you when everything is in place.'

They stepped into Robert's path and when he saw them his smile froze for an instant. He looked behind him to check where Ellen was and when he turned back to the twins his smile was back up to full voltage and his teeth on show. He kissed Sofia on both cheeks and shook Paulo firmly by the hand, then led them both by the elbow towards the piano. He gave a nod to the pianist and she stood up and took a break.

When the music stopped, Patti turned around from her conversation with the women at the baccarat table and looked towards the piano, and when she saw Robert talking with the twins she waved the women away and watched the conversation in silence.

Patti wasn't the only one watching the conversation. Ellen was stepping through the crowd, a sad look of abandonment in her eyes. As she passed the end of the bar, drifting towards the piano, Kavanagh intercepted her.

'Can I buy you a drink?' she asked, giving her a sideways smile laced with a little flirting.

Ellen took a sidestep, lifting a hand as if to wave Kavanagh away, but then she saw the pearl around her throat, her eyes widened in recognition, and she dropped her hand. 'You don't need to buy anything in here,' she said, her eyes running over Kavanagh from her necklace to her shoes and back again. 'What are you drinking?'

'A martini.'

Ellen raised her hand again and clicked her fingers at the bartender, then waved two fingers at Kavanagh's glass. 'I didn't recognise you at first,' she said. 'There was a strange disconnect, seeing someone like you in this place. World's that shouldn't mix.'

'I'm a guest of the twins.'

'I see that,' said Ellen, staring at Kavanagh's chest and hips. 'That Givenchy looks better on you than it did on Sofia. At least you've got some curves to fill it out. I couldn't wear anything like that. I might as well be Chinese for all the tits and ass I've got.'

The drinks arrived and Ellen handed one to Kavanagh and chinked her own glass against it. 'Cheers, my dear,' she said and drained the glass in one. She gasped for air. 'That worked.'

She looked around the room, from face to face, from the Chinese matrons to the young Russian girls and then back to Kavanagh.

'Are we the only young white chicks in the room that aren't hookers?' she said, plucking the olive from her empty glass and putting it in her mouth.

'I thought you were getting married for money?' said Kavanagh. 'Why do people who sell their souls look down on people who sell their bodies?'

Ellen stared at Kavanagh for a moment, not sure how to take the comment, then her face creased and she laughed out loud, throwing her head back. 'Thank-you,' she said. 'That's just what I needed, a stiff drink and a slap around the face.'

'If you'd like a real slap, I can do that for you. Just to snap you right out of it.'

Ellen was still laughing, then her nose began to run and she sniffed and put the back of her hand to her nose. Kavanagh watched this and then checked Ellen's eyes, which were shining like glass.

'You're good,' said Ellen. 'But you don't want to believe everything the twins tell you. Those two are so frosty, they wouldn't know love or lust if it stabbed them through the heart with an ice pick.'

She waved her empty glass towards Patti at the baccarat table. 'Look at her,' she said. 'That is my prospective mother-in-law. Watching her son like a fucking hawk. No amount of money, casinos and private fucking jets could compensate for having to be related to that old empress. I'm marrying for love.'

'Is she really going to sing?

'Nobody would dare stop her.'

'Is she any good?'

'Karaoke is like poker. There's a big difference between what a person thinks of their own ability and their actual talent.'

'Like sex,' said Kavanagh. 'Men delude themselves about their ability in bed.'

'Maybe, but most men would rather admit to being a terrible lover than a poor poker player.'

'Poker certainly lasts longer,' said Kavanagh, and drained her glass.

'I don't have to worry about that. With Robert, it's the real thing.'

'Love or lust?' asked Kavanagh.

Ellen laughed again. 'Every relationship is a thick stew of emotions,' she said, 'from lust to disgust, from desperate love to homicidal rage. It would be crazy to reduce such a wonderful diet to a question so simple. Love me or love me not. That's the sort of question you should only ask daisy petals.'

'So your father's business has nothing to do with your marriage?'

Ellen was still laughing, silently now, her shoulders quivering. 'You know, I like you,' she said. 'If things had been different, we could have been friends.'

'I've seen your friends. I'm not like them.'

'I don't need any enemies, anyway. I have plenty of them around the family dining table.'

Ellen stood watching her father at the poker table, thinking about him, until she said. 'It's important to my father. He will have a rapid comeback once the bankruptcy is wound up. He'll go back and put a few deals into it and give the shareholders some value. He's a man of incredible vision, in business at least. But once he's back on his feet he'll forget about me and I have to think about what happens then.'

'Your father has a lot in common with Robert.'

Ellen wiped her hand under her nose. 'That's what they say. Every little girl is looking for a man just like her father. They see the same thing with Robert when they see him with his mother. Electra and Oedipus, that's what they think, but soon we'll both be out from under their shadow. I don't want to fuck my dad. I only want to fuck Robert. Just look at him.'

Robert was still talking with the twins. Kavanagh could see the family resemblance, the strong jaw and the straight nose. Then she looked at Patti, small and dumpy.

'He must get his looks from his father.'

'They all do,' said Ellen. 'They are sickeningly beautiful, all three, but just don't tell them that.'

'I think they know already.'

'Of course they know. All three of them cherish their image like a peacock does its feathers, but the rich never believe it when you compliment them. They are used to sycophants, cheats, losers and hustlers. They think everyone wants something from them, so are either flattering them or simply envious. All you can do is admire them from afar.'

'But you're rich.'

‘Not by their standards. My father thinks he’s their equal but they think he’s just a small fish, and they’ll throw him back when they’re finished.’

‘You don’t care?’

‘Not if it gets me out from under his shadow.’

‘And Robert is the same?’

Ellen was looking into her empty glass, as if she might find some wisdom there. ‘Macau is like Australia,’ she said. ‘You only have to have wealth for two generations and they start to call you a dynasty. The trick is to try and make it to the third generation.’

‘I thought the Lau’s were still worrying about how the money is distributed to the old man’s children?’

More drinks arrived and Ellen slumped against the bar and wrapped both her hands around the stem of the martini glass. She tipped it and drank from it, eyeing Kavanagh as she did so. ‘What are you doing here?’ she said.

‘I’m just stirring up the shit. See what floats and what sinks.’

‘You’re doing this for the twins?’

‘No, I’m just using them for free drinks and a second-hand frock.’

‘Old man Lau is still going strong. Glowing with health and radiating vigour, even if the old coot walks with a stick. He’s got this Chinese medicine man giving him the weirdest sort of shit. There are a lot fewer rhino and tigers in the world now just to keep the old man’s dick up. It’s so he can fuck his little stable of girls. He reckons his power will be sapped if he doesn’t have sex every day.’

She took another sip from her glass and swilled it around her mouth before she said, ‘Nothing will be decided this weekend. This is a long game. He’s still very much at the helm of the company, although he’s given Robert a free hand with the casino business and some of the mining interests.’

‘So Robert inherits everything? Why is he doing all this manoeuvring?’

‘People think there is some sort of primogeniture at work in Chinese society. It’s not like that. The eldest son is only heir to the family business if he is deemed worthy of it. The old man still thinks of him as an actor and a playboy. Robert will soon prove himself as a businessman.’

The twins had left Robert now, moving across the room to talk with a group of old Chinese men in designer suits and dyed hair. Patti saw her opportunity and walked over to her son, put her arms around his neck, pulling his head down to her level so she could kiss him on the lips. His face had changed, the confidence drained out of it, looking even younger now, like a schoolboy being scolded.

Patti spoke in his ear for a few moments, and then released him and made her way to the piano. She sat down on the stool and waved to the pianist to join her. They sat side by side, examining the sheet music on the stand in front of them.

Robert watched his mother for a minute and then turned around to look at Kavanagh. He looked her up and down in the same way Ellen had, taking in the borrowed clothes and jewellery, then he looked at Ellen and his face broke into a sheepish grin. It was a different smile than he had used on the rest of the room, his eyes joining in this time. It was as Kavanagh had thought: they had something special that they kept for themselves. Ellen smiled back at him, her cheeks flushed, the argument forgotten. Robert walked over and put his hands around her waist and pulled her to him, kissing her hard on the mouth, tipping her over to one side, a big movie kiss and Kavanagh knew it was for her benefit but she let them play it out.

When he released her from the clench he turned his head and said to her, ‘Have we met?’



She extended her hand towards him, the wrist limp. 'Rose Kavanagh,' she said. She wanted to see if he would kiss her hand, eager to know if he could be that cheesy. He could, and he did.

'Are you enjoying the salon?' he said, his head still bowed to her wrist. His accent was American, relaxed and flowing, very different from the twins' mannered European vowels, and Kavanagh wondered how much time he had spent in the States.

'I don't gamble,' she said. 'I'm only here for the cabaret.' She nodded towards the piano.

Robert's smile dimmed a couple of watts, and he looked at Ellen. She gave him a look to tell him to enjoy the banter, and he responded by showing Kavanagh his dimples.

'I understand you are staying as a guest of Sofia's?'

'My friend is here to play poker.'

'I hear he's losing.'

Kavanagh shrugged. 'It's not his money.'

'I watched him play for a couple of hands while I was over there by the piano. I grew up in a casino, spent my life looking at gamblers and players. I see just a twitch or a blink and I know if they are a player or not. It didn't take me long to get a read on him and it's not hard for me to read you.'

'You think you know me?'

'I've seen plenty like you before. I know everybody in this room. I know who they are connected to, who their friends are, and who they owe favours to. I know what everybody in this room wants. I know when they want me to be their buddy and I know if they want me to kiss their ass. I know every man's credit line to the dollar, what kind of scotch he drinks, and what he wants for his supper. I know if he likes tall Russian

women with fake tits or if he wants a little flat chested girl from Jiangsu who'll give him a poison dragon drill. I know everyone's taste, and I give it to them.'

'Then you'll know that all I want is answers. Are you going to give me that?'

Robert just stared at her and smiled, so she said, 'Have the police questioned you?' She felt relieved that the small talk was over.

'The police are not welcome up here, and we would not appreciate their presence.'

'You think you're out of reach in your ivory tower?'

Robert shrugged. 'Perth is not so different from Macau. The police can be kept at arm's length, if you have the right connections.'

Kavanagh ignored his smug smile. 'I'm investigating the murder of Diane Bonner and the disappearance of Alannah Doyle.'

Robert's smile barely flickered. Kavanagh made sure she kept eye contact, but she could see his eyes were glassy too, and she wondered if the cocaine was something he needed to keep up the mask of self-confidence.

'You are no longer a police officer,' he said, 'which is why we tolerate you here. Are you some sort of private detective now?'

Before she could answer, the room filled with piano music, and a ripple of applause went around the room as Patti stepped up to the microphone. She raised a hand in acknowledgement, then closed her eyes, waiting for her cue, before launching into 'Fly Me to the Moon.' She clicked her fingers in syncopation, but she was a little off the beat, which was just a little too slow to swing. Her voice wasn't nearly as bad as Kavanagh had imagined. A little high-pitched to carry off the song, which sounded like Cantopop at times, but it wasn't the torture she had braced herself for.

The baccarat players stopped playing and stepped back from the table to watch her. Kavanagh wasn't sure if it was out of deference or a real appreciation of the music.

Robert watched in rapture, his eyes wide and wet, his head nodding to the beat. Kavanagh stepped in front of him to block his view and his face fell back into the expression of a spoilt boy before he caught himself and turned on the smile again. He leaned closer to Kavanagh and spoke in her ear.

‘The Salon is not the place for conducting business,’ he said. ‘We can talk more candidly in my office.’

Kavanagh took a step towards the door but hesitated. She looked to the poker table but Ford had his back to her, still talking with McCann. Roth was watching her, though, and she could see his mouth moving, whispering to the woman beside him. She looked for the twins, but they were still on the far side with the business men. Then she saw Singh, standing by the entrance door, his back to the wall, a look of benign calm on his face. He nodded to her like a doorman greeting a returning guest, and somehow it gave her confidence. She ran her hands down her thighs, smoothing out the dress and checking that the blade was still tucked in her stocking top, then she bit down on her fear and walked towards the office door.

**21.**

Robert closed the door behind them, and the murmur and the music fell to a faint purr. The door was soundproof, the inside face upholstered with studded red leather. Kavanagh heard the soft click as the door locked, and turned away from Robert to survey the room. It was a complete contrast to the pale minimalism of the rest of the hotel, and looked like a gentleman's club from Edwardian London: an overstuffed and distressed red leather Chesterfield suite, wood panelling on the walls, a bookshelf along the long wall opposite the windows, and a massive polished oak desk across the far end of the room. She checked the ceiling for security cameras and could see none. There was only one other door, on the far wall behind the desk, and it was ajar.

Kavanagh walked behind the desk and looked through the gap in the door and saw an en-suite bathroom. She looked over her shoulder at Robert, but he hadn't moved away from the padded door. She was trapped.

He looked relaxed, a smile on his face. He pulled his dinner jacket down and fidgeted with his cufflinks. Kavanagh put the desk between them and looked across its polished wooden top. There were four framed photographs on the desk: two showed Robert with his arm around his mother, paparazzi shots on the red carpet outside a movie theatre. The other two photos were of Robert clutching awards behind a podium, and next to each photo was the trophy itself: one a golden prancing horse, the other a black figurine of a woman wrapped in a strip of golden celluloid.

'Taiwan and Hong Kong Film Awards,' said Robert. Kavanagh ignored him, more intrigued that he didn't have a photo of Ellen on his desk. She spotted a faint trail of white powder on the polished wood of the desk, just a ghost line of cocaine left behind by Robert. There was a tray of pens beside it, and next to a vintage Mont Blanc was a rolled up bank note. She picked it up and unfurled it, an American thousand-dollar bill,

a frosting of white powder along the edge. She ran her finger along it and rubbed the residue on her gums, feeling the delicious tingle in her mouth. Robert watched her and said, 'Would you like a line?'

Kavanagh shook her head. There was a movie poster behind the desk, Robert in a tuxedo in with his arm around a woman in a torn red dress. He was firing a gun, and behind them a helicopter exploded in the night sky above a city skyline. The title of the movie was in Chinese.

'So can you do all that *kung fu* stuff?' she said.

'Not my genre,' said Robert. 'I did Heroic Bloodshed. All about brotherhood, honour, and redemption. Lots of gun play and gangsters. They call it *gun fu*.'

'I've seen that. It was a guilty pleasure when I was at school. I grew out of it when I signed up for the police. I don't think I saw any of your movies. So did you ever dive through a doorway shooting two guns at the same time?'

Robert laughed and pointed to the poster. 'I did it in that movie,' he said. 'I won the Golden Horse for that.'

'How about Hollywood? Did you ever make any movies there?'

'I spoke to some studios in California, but there was nothing right for me. I was moving into more romantic roles by then. Those Hong Kong stars that went to Hollywood, did you ever see them in a movie where they got the girl?'

'But you've got the white girl now.'

Kavanagh could feel the coke tingling on her gums, a little buzz happening, that little rush of self confidence. She said, 'Does Zhou work for you?'

Robert laughed, and then there was a knock at the door, muffled through the leather. Robert opened it and Henk Roth was standing in the doorway, the tall dark woman at his shoulder. Robert spoke a few words to them both and Roth stepped into

the room, his eyes on Kavanagh. Robert stepped past him and left the room, closing the door, leaving the woman outside.

‘Your girl is standing guard?’ asked Kavanagh.

‘She’s not my girl,’ said Roth.

‘No,’ said Kavanagh. ‘I figured she was paid by the hour.’

Roth laughed at this. ‘Your friend Ford asked me the same question,’ he said. ‘She’s not a Russian hooker.’

Kavanagh shrugged and Roth laughed again. ‘I’ll have to tell her. She’ll get a kick out of that.’

‘So who is she?’

‘Yana was a captain in the Israeli Defence Force, and after that she did some work for Shin Bet that she won’t tell me about. Then she went freelance, and now she works for me.’

‘Are you putting together another mercenary army?’

‘I wouldn’t call it that. It’s barely a squad.’

Kavanagh was staring at Roth now, trying to get the measure of him. ‘Planning to rob the game, maybe knock over the casino?’ she asked.

Roth didn’t blink. ‘One more person and we might have enough for a basketball team. Would you like to join?’

‘Me?’

‘You’re out of work, I hear. And you can handle yourself.’

Kavanagh thought about that, and picked up the golden horse, wrapping her hand around the torso, hefting it for weight.

‘You can put that down,’ said Roth. ‘You have no need of a weapon in here.’

‘So why is your woman guarding the door?’

‘So we can speak without being disturbed.’

Roth stepped away from the door and sat on the arm of the sofa, his hands resting open in his lap. He looked good in his suit, fitter than when she had last seen him in Marble Bar. He wouldn't have looked out of place in a movie himself, a different kind of star to Robert.

Kavanagh didn't like the pretty-boy type, she preferred an actor who could make her believe he'd lived through something, like he could handle himself, and she'd seen Roth act cool with a gun in his hand. She knew he was the real thing. She thought back to the first time she'd met him, lying bleeding on the floor of the aircraft hanger after Ford had given him both barrels of a sawn-off shotgun. Roth's shoulder was ripped open, his hand shredded, but he lay there calmly talking to her, showing no sign of pain, asking her for a cigarette while they waited for uniform police and an ambulance to show up.

Roth motioned for her to sit down, and she sat in the studded leather chair behind the desk, perched on the edge, ready to move. She laid her hands flat on her thighs, pulling the hem of her dress up so the top of her stockings and the heel of the blade were exposed.

'I thought Robert got Zhou to do his dirty work for him?' she said.

'His English isn't so good,' said Roth. 'Besides, Robert thinks that you are Alan's problem, that it's his fault you are here, and so I have to deal with you.'

Kavanagh wondered if he had been able to bring a gun past the metal detectors. If not, then she stood a small chance against him.

'You don't frighten me, she said. 'I'm not intimidated.'

'Good, that's not my intention. I just want you to know you're out of your depth here. You have no experience dealing with these people. Australians are not known for their tact. Plain speaking is not considered a virtue among the Chinese. They do not find directness charming, especially coming from a woman.'

'Am I getting charm lessons from a white South African?'

'I like the Chinese,' he said. 'I like that they are closed and private, don't feel the need to shout. Australians always imagine that you need to know what they are thinking at every given moment. I don't.'

'I've never been accused of being garrulous.'

'That's not what I hear from Chadwick. He tells me you are conducting your own murder investigation.'

'I'm more concerned by the disappearance of Alannah Doyle.'

Roth was watching her coolly. 'That cop thing you do,' he said. 'That expression of boredom and contempt, that attitude of entitlement, it won't work here, especially without a badge. These people have no respect for the police, or for any arm of government. They assume everyone is corrupt.'

'There's some truth to that. Chadwick is living proof. How is the police investigation going?'

'Not so well. Chadwick told them not to pursue any links to Alan or the Laus, so that's left them in a dead-end. But he thinks you might be doing better. Your investigations brought you here.'

'The twins brought us to the hotel.'

'So something must have brought them to your attention.'

Kavanagh thought about that for a while before she said, 'They know about Diane selling out to Robert. They think that putting Ford in the same room as them will shake things up. Maybe make McCann or Robert do something rash.'

'You don't have anything that links Diane's death to Alan.'

'I didn't say I did.'

Roth smiled. 'Why are you doing this?' he asked.

'What else have I got? If I don't go after this, then I'm supposed to sit on the couch at home watching soap operas?'



‘So what’s your boy doing out there? I see him at the poker table, he seems to be having a good time. Doesn’t look like a man who just lost his wife.’

‘I wouldn’t read him like that. I think he’s changed. He’s becoming used to this game that you play. He’s used to putting on an act.’

‘Alan is as devastated at this as Ford. That’s why we’ve got Chadwick looking into it.’

‘But he is stopping any line of questioning that leads here. What about Alannah Doyle?’

‘The police are looking into it. The newspaper is making a stink, saying her disappearance is connected to Diane’s murder.’

‘I showed them the link.’

‘Are you going to share that with me?’

‘What have you got to trade? Just tell me if Alannah is in this building.’

Roth smiled and rubbed his chin, showing where the middle finger was missing from his right hand. ‘Sofia might like to adopt the demeanour of a saint, but you can’t trust her.’

‘That much I know,’ said Kavanagh. ‘They say we’re their guests, but they’ve got us locked in here. We don’t have security cards, and all the lifts are guarded.’

‘Wealth is an attitude of mind, like poverty. These children have been born with so much privilege that nothing in the way of worldly riches can possibly change their lives, so they play these games to make themselves feel alive.’

‘So all this between Robert and the twins, it’s just some sort of poker game?’

Roth liked that. ‘It can only be a game. They can’t directly attack each other, their father wouldn’t allow it. He likes to think that his family is harmonious.’

‘So why risk everything?’

‘Did you take a look at the players around that poker table? They all have more money than they know how to spend. Nothing they win or lose will affect them, but see how seriously they play the game. They got where they are because they took risks, and now they’ve got all that success they are bored. They need risk in their lives, so they go looking for it. They need competition; they need to taste the jugular. You and me, we’re just chips in the game.’

Roth reached in his pocket and pulled out his swipe card.

Kavanagh saw it and tried to remain calm. ‘Does that give you access to all areas?’

Roth nodded. ‘Every floor in this hotel except Robert’s suite and the gaming room.’

‘Who controls security?’

‘Zhou, on Robert’s behalf.’

‘Does he have control over all the security cameras as well?’

‘It’s a locked box, this place.’

‘Give me the key and I’ll share what I know.’

Roth stood up, thinking, put the card back in his pocket and walked over to the bookcase that ran along the side wall. He opened a door to reveal a drinks cabinet, and took down two glasses. ‘Drink?’ he asked.

Kavanagh shook her head.

He opened another door that hid a fridge, and took out a frosted bottle of vodka and splashed an inch into each glass. ‘You’re not in any position of strength to make any bargains.’

He walked over to the desk and Kavanagh stiffened, pulling the blade from her stocking and holding it under the desk. Roth offered the glass, putting it on the edge of the desk at arm’s length. ‘You’re not a cop any more, you can have a drink’ he said. He retreated to the couch and sat down, watching her. ‘You haven’t let that go yet, have you?’ he said.

She picked up the drink and drank it in one, feeling it burn on the way down and then the warm glow flood out from her belly. 'If you were going to kill me, you wouldn't be talking,' she said. 'So you're playing your own angle, and I'm part of it. Give me the key.'

'How do I know you won't come after Alan?'

'Because he's not responsible for this. He's responsible for a lot else that turned my life to shit in Kalgoorlie and Marble Bar, but this is something different.'

Roth took the card from his pocket again and looked at it, thinking, then with a flick of his wrist launched it spinning across the room to land on the desk in front of Kavanagh. She picked it up and examined the hotel logo on the small rectangle of plastic.

'I don't have much evidence, but I'm sure that Zhou is responsible for Diane's death. He's connected to Alannah's disappearance too.'

'You think she's in the hotel?'

'Makes sense. If the police can't get in here, if Zhou controls access.'

'What does he want with her?'

'She was snooping into the deal between McCann and Robert Lau. In Marble Bar the lengths Robert will go to make sure McCann signs.'

'Robert was protecting Diane in Marble Bar. Why would he change his mind?'

Kavanagh felt she'd given him a fair exchange for the swipe card. Any more information and she'd risk exposing Iron Crutch and the one advantage she had over Roth. She simply shrugged.

'You're in the private sector now,' said Roth. 'The burden of proof is a lot more lax. Evidence is not required. If you think Zhou is responsible, raise the stakes. Make a move and see what he does.'

'I'm not like a poker player,' said Kavanagh. 'I'm not into bluff. My way is to look someone in the eye and tell them the way I'm intending to go. My cards are always on the table.'

'No, they're not,' said Roth. 'You just tried to bullshit me. I know you've got evidence that leads you to Zhou. Your face gave it away immediately. Not that it matters.' He got up, walked to the door, and opened it. The sound of Patti's singing flooded back into the room above the murmur of the gaming room and the click of chips at the tables. 'She's not so bad, is she?'

Kavanagh put the blade back in her stocking top and pulled the dress down over it. She stood up and smoothed out the wrinkles. 'I prefer something with a bit more energy to it. Something I can dance to.'

She walked to the door and when she got close to him she said. 'I still haven't figured your angle on this.'

'In a few years, you're going to look back and try to pick the moment you crossed the line. This might be it, taking that key from me. This is the first time you asked for my help.'

'I don't remember asking. You just tossed that key across the room at me like you were tipping a waitress.'

'But you took it.'

Kavanagh sighed. 'Crossing the line, it's not a single leap. It's been a lot of small steps on a long journey. One that started in Kalgoorlie. And all that time you've never taken the opportunity to kill me. You just keep me guessing why.'

Roth raised an eyebrow. 'If Robert wants to keep Alan off balance, then I want to keep Robert second guessing too.'

'In Marble Bar you didn't always have Alan's best interests at heart.'

'You just focus on Zhou. Leave Alan to me.'

'You're giving me a clear run at him?'

She looked for some acknowledgement from Roth, but his face was blank. 'Revenge is easy and over so quickly,' he said. 'You are on the brink of breaking loose. Almost ready to give up on all that ethical bullshit that kept you in the police force. Ready to embrace your misanthropy.'

'You're no different from the twins, said Kavanagh. 'Using me and Ford to ruffle feathers.'

Roth waved her through the door and his arm swept across the room. 'You and Ford being alive, that's the ultimate insult to these people.'

**22.**

Kavanagh walked from the office and gave Roth a small smile, knowing that there were three pairs of eyes on her. Ellen was still leaning on the bar looking bored, watching with detached curiosity. Beyond Ellen, Robert was talking with a fat man with a sunburnt forehead, looking over the man's shoulder at her, then scanning the room looking for Roth.

Patti was at the microphone, a few bars into 'Cry Me a River', and her voice broke when she saw Kavanagh, stumbling over the words and taking another line to recover. When Kavanagh reached the bar Ellen was laughing. Patti was battling her way through the chorus, and when she missed the high note she turned to the pianist, shook her head and stepped away from the mike. She walked across to the bar, fury in her face, her eyes moving from Kavanagh to Ellen and back again. She stopped a couple of metres from them and put her hands on her hips, unsteady on her heels.

'Well look here,' she said. 'Two blonde western girls with your white skin and your original sin.' Her accent was heavily Chinese, a contrast with the younger generation of Laus who had been educated overseas. Now that Patti was closer Kavanagh could see the lines etched on her face, the make-up so thick it had filled them. Kavanagh looked at Patti's hair, trying to see if was a wig. She had died it so black it looked blue, and there was so much lacquer keeping it vertical that it sparkled in the light like candy floss.

Ellen was still smirking. 'Why don't you take five, Patti? Give your vocal cords a rest? How about a drink to soak your tonsils?'

Patti ignored her, her attention directed at Kavanagh. 'Why are you here?' she hissed. 'You and that fool playing poker? Foreigners who have eaten their fill and have nothing better to do than point their fingers at our affairs.'

Kavanagh turned away from Patti and waved the bartender over. 'Vodka,' she said, before turning calmly back to Patti. 'I thought you were the foreigner here.'

Patti's eyes flared. 'You come here to stare. Desperate to understand the people you fear one day will reduce you to the status of white coolies.'

Kavanagh laughed now, but Patti was just getting into her stride. 'That princess and princeling bring you here, thinking you can disrupt this deal. They disown their heritage, hiding in Europe, teetering on the edge of their own myth. They are on the wrong side of history. Once old countries like Egypt, Greece, France or Britain go down, they never come up again, but China will rise again and dominate the world.'

Kavanagh sipped at her chilled vodka and rolled her eyes at Ellen. 'When the dragon awakes, she will shake the world?'

Robert appeared at his mother's elbow and pulled her away, speaking softly in her ear and leading her back to the piano. She turned her head and shouted back. 'The mantis catches the locust but does not see the yellow bird ready to snatch him from behind.'

Kavanagh knocked back the rest of her drink and turned to Ellen. 'Is she always like that?'

Ellen sniggered. 'I get maybe half of what she says,' she said. 'You'd better excuse me. I shouldn't have laughed at her. I need to go over there and play the dutiful daughter-in-law. It will take me days to get back onside.'

She wandered over to the piano and tried to insert herself between Robert and his mother. The pianist played the intro to another song and drowned out their voices.

Kavanagh felt a nudge in her ribs and turned to find Ford beside her. 'What are you drinking?' he asked, nodding towards her empty glass.

'Vodka,' she said. 'I was bracing myself to talk to Roth, and then Robert and his crazy fucking mother.'

‘Did you learn anything?’

‘Only that Patti is bitter and twisted.’

‘So can I get you another vodka?’

‘No. I need to slow down. Get me something girly.’

‘Well, if I want something bitter with a twist, I usually order a Negroni.’

‘Was that what you made me back in our room? What’s in that?’

‘Campari, vermouth, gin, and a twist of burnt orange. The bitters are excellent for your liver, but the gin is bad for you. They balance each other.’

‘That’ll do it.’ She was still watching Patti talking to her son. Ford followed where she was looking. He said, ‘You seem to have done what you set out to do: stirred up some shit.’

The drinks arrived and she sipped at it, the bitter taste a relief.

‘What did you learn from Roth?’ asked Ford.

‘He’s trying to protect McCann from Robert, keep him from getting steamrolled in this deal. I told him we think Zhou is behind Diane’s death, and he didn’t look surprised. He won’t stand in our way, as long as we don’t go after McCann.’

Ford looked for Roth, found him standing behind McCann at the poker table.

‘How’s your game going?’ she asked him.

‘I’m down,’ said Ford. ‘I’m on a losing streak.’

‘Then why are you so upbeat?’

‘Because I’ve ridden it out and kept most of my stash. I’ve been patient. I can’t tell you how many hands I’ve folded, but a better run of luck will arrive soon.’

Kavanagh exhaled slowly. ‘I’m not sure I can cope with all this waiting. I need to find Alannah.’

‘There is a difference between waiting and patience,’ said Ford. ‘Waiting is just biding your time. Patience is hard work. It requires concentration to identify your



opportunity. There can be hours of boredom interrupted by moments of action and sheer terror.'

'Sounds like police work,' said Kavanagh.

'The opportunity will come. All these Chinese do is try to bluff.'

'You can read them? I haven't been able to do so. Their whole life is one big front.'

'You can have a poker face, but not many people have a poker body. That good-looking guy in the chair to my left, when he bluffs he stays completely still. He's an actor, he has control over his body, but when he gets a good hand he forgets to control himself and he starts shaking like a shitting dog.'

'Has he been losing to you then?'

'Not yet, but it will happen. These Chinese players like to show off their wealth by their complete indifference to losing money. When my luck changes, I'll take it.'

'I didn't think you believed in luck?'

'I don't, but the other players do. My trick is not to be affected by luck, but to observe it and position myself accordingly. I can't control luck, but I can maximise my return by watching its effect on the game and the other players. Poker is like the rest of life. Two things define you: your patience when you have nothing, and your attitude when you have everything.'

Kavanagh got the feeling that Ford would keep talking about poker if she let him. But then listening to him she thought of a question and asked. 'How's McCann?'

'He's not a bad player, but he's not a good one either. He's lost slowly all evening by making a few poor decisions and getting unlucky, and there's no reason to think either problem will be solved by betting higher. As the game wears on, he's not going to be able to resist raising the stakes.'

'He's a canny businessman. I thought he'd be a shrewd poker player.'

Ford shook his head. 'He's your typical rich man. If he wins, it's because he is playing well, has all the moves. If he loses it's because the cards aren't running for him. These guys are the same on the stock market. When there's a boom, everyone gets rich and they think it's because they're smart. They think they earned it. When the inevitable bust comes, then it's just bad luck, the vagaries of the market, forces beyond their control. Then they want someone to bail them out.'

'You got all of that at the table?'

Ford nodded. 'The game exemplifies all the worst aspects of the capitalism that made this country so great.'

'From here it looks like seven catatonic people staring at green felt.'

'And I should get back to them. I have the feeling things are going to liven up in the next couple of hours.'

'And what about me?' asked Kavanagh. 'I've exhausted all the conversation and death threats I think I'm going to get at this bar.'

'Stick around. Maybe you could pick up a sugar daddy.'

Kavanagh looked around the room and sniffed. 'You, Roth and Singh are the only men in this room taller than me. Why are rich men so short?'

Ford finished his drink and put down his empty glass. 'They may be short, but if they stand on their wallets they'll be looking down at you.'

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

'What was that for?'

'For luck, what else?'

'I'm not sure either you or me has been bringing anyone any luck these last few months.'

'It will even up,' said Ford. 'In the long run the odds even out. It's just that the short run lasts longer than you think.'

She stood still for a second, not sure whether to push him away or pull him closer, but by the time she had made up her mind he was across the room towards the poker table.

She hadn't wanted him to go, to leave her alone in this room, with people that she didn't understand and didn't want to. He seemed more comfortable among them, he could speak their language, had been to the same sort of schools. She'd watched the way he could change. His accent was the first thing. She'd heard him in Kalgoorlie and Marble Bar, less English and more Australian, his language as coarse as any other bloke in the pub. Now he was something different, and she wondered where he felt more at ease, in her world or in this one.

She could stand at the bar, unstable in borrowed shoes, feeling the eyes of the room on her, almost hear Patti, Robert and the twins using her name, her ear picking through the hum of Chinese voices, listening for her name.

The alternative was to leave the salon, try to use the key that Roth had given her, search the hotel, but she didn't know where to start and dreaded what she might find. If Alannah Doyle was in the hotel, she would be behind locked doors, with men in front of them and cameras in the ceiling. She realised her reluctance was that if she left the room, she would be on her own, and leaving Ford on his own. She wasn't sure which was more dangerous, but then thought of the reason they were there, why the twins had brought them to the hotel, and what they had promised each other. If she couldn't find Alannah, then she could at least try to throw the family off balance, and her only opportunity to do that was right now, with all the players in this room, all busy, all attention on the gaming tables.

She looked behind her for Singh. He had moved away from the door, taken up a position along the side of the room, his back to the long window, the city lights behind him. He was where he could watch the twins, but he seemed to be watching Ford, a

benign smile on his face. She wondered how many hours a day he stood like that that same smile on his face, the look of infinite patience, waiting to be given an order by his rich, spoilt employers. He caught her looking at him, and without changing his smile he gave her a slow nod, and he watched her as she turned away from him and headed for the lift lobby.

**23.**

McCann was watching Ford as he walked back to the poker table, his head tilted down towards the table but his eyes looking sideways from under his heavy grey eyebrows, his fingers fidgeting with his chips. Ford had only just sat down and pulled his chair up to the table when McCann said, 'Why don't you tell me what you want?' He said it quietly, under his breath, his eyes now shifting to Zhou across the table.

'What makes you think I want anything?' said Ford. 'And what makes you think you've got it?'

The deal came round again. Ford looked at his cards and saw a pair of sevens. It was the first pocket pair he had seen that evening, and he felt obliged to play. When it came around to McCann he folded and said, 'Everybody wants something, and I've got it all.'

Ford called the big blind. 'You don't have as much as the Laus.'

'No,' said McCann. 'But I'm on my way. I'd have a lot more money if they'd ever sit down at this table and play poker with me.'

'Are they any good?'

'They're not good players, but they're good gamblers.'

Zhou called and Mao raised and when it got to Ford he called and waited to see the flop. He could feel McCann getting restless next to him, eager to talk, and so he kept quiet, seeing how long McCann could hold out without talking. He didn't last long.

'Gambling is much more serious for the Chinese. For you and me, this is about skill and competition, but for them it's a status symbol. It means you have money to lose, and you can afford all this luxury, and they want to feel the thrill that accompanies the conviction that the gods favour you and you get lucky.'

'So you're telling me they are harder to read?'

Across the table Zhou was staring at him and smiling, not a smile that conveyed an emotion, but a blank mask. Ford was used to the deadpan poker face, guys trying not to let any expressions cross their face, but Zhou was different. The smile was on his lips, but his eyes were dead.

Ford kept up the eye contact while the dealer dealt the flop. It was an old trick, looking at another player when the cards were turned. It stopped you from giving anything away when you saw the cards, some little involuntary twitch of the eyes if you hit.

When Zhou looked down at the three cards on the table, so did Ford, and he saw three low cards of different suits, none of which improved his hand. He checked and when Zhou raised he folded.

‘You’re slowly losing,’ said McCann. ‘Your stack is getting nibbled away. You play too cautiously, always looking for a cheap flop. You can’t keep folding hands.’

‘You show your skill by the hands you fold, not the hands you play,’ said Ford. As long as he knew that Kavanagh was close by, knew he could look towards the bar and see her watching him, he could be patient and fold his weak hands, not feel the need to rush the cards or push his bets. He turned towards the bar to find her but she was gone. He looked around the room and found the twins and Robert, and the sound of Patti’s singing cut through the chatter in the room. He checked Roth and found him watching. The widow was smiling too, pretending to look down at the cards but enjoying the conversation.

‘You show your skill by the size of your stack at the end of the night,’ said McCann, and Ford counted his chips. His stack had gone down by a third, but he still had enough for it not to inhibit his play. It was still early, and he knew his run of cards would change, and when the rush came he would be ready. He looked at the other stacks. McCann seemed to be breaking even, his stack now at over two million, about

even with Ford. Zhou was sitting on a million and a half, and going down. Mao was still the chip leader, followed by the widow. The Movie Star and the Race Driver were short stacked and had not been playing many hands, waiting for premium cards so they could push all-in.

‘So it’s all about the money for you,’ said Ford, watching the hand play out. Zhou raised again on the turn. Only the widow was left in the hand and she folded and gave Ford a wink as she mucked her cards.

The next hand was dealt and Ford watched McCann as he turned up the corner of his cards and took just long enough looking at them for Ford to think that he had something. It took McCann a good ten seconds to stop thinking about his cards and remember the conversation.

‘Money isn’t a big motivation for me, except as a way to keep score.’

‘Like your business?’ Ford turned the corners of his own cards and saw a pair of threes, hearts and diamonds. That was the way it happened, a whole hour without a pocket pair and then two pairs come along one after the other. The button was with The Racing Driver, the Widow was the big blind, so McCann would be first to act. Ford’s threes weren’t strong enough to lead out, so he’d just see what McCann did and limp in behind him if the bet wasn’t too large.

McCann looked at his cards again and then raised to sixty thousand. It was a standard bet, three times the big blind, but the fact that he did it from an early position told Ford that he had something, but probably a drawing hand.

‘Business is the same skill set as poker,’ said McCann. ‘It’s about shrewdness, risk management, and the ability to leverage uncertainty. They are both games of incomplete information. You have a certain set of facts and you’re looking for situations where you have an edge, whether it’s psychological or statistical.’

Ford let him talk and quietly called his bet and watched as the Movie Star beside him called and then Zhou did the same. The Racing Driver thought about it for a while and then called, as did Mao and the widow, making it a nice family pot with everybody in.

‘After football and warfare, poker has to be the single most overused metaphor for business,’ said Ford. ‘I get that they are both a big gamble, and you like to bluff in both, but anything else and it starts to sound like country music.’

Ford looked at the dealer as she turned over the flop cards and then he looked at the table. There were two kings, spades and diamonds, and sandwiched between them was the three of spades. He had flopped a full house, but the pair of kings made him pause for a moment and he made himself think. He became aware of his tells, remembered not to look at his cards again or fidget with his chips. He focused on the widow’s hands, counting the rings on her fingers, trying to decide whether her nails were real or fake, waiting for the players ahead of him to act.

Mao and the Widow both checked, deferring to McCann as the raiser. McCann didn’t take any time to think, he raised by the value of the pot, a hundred and twenty thousand.

This was what Ford had been waiting for. McCann had a king and was leading out, making a continuation bet with his set. All Ford had to think about was where the other king and three might be. McCann didn’t have pocket kings, or he would have bet harder before the flop, but he didn’t have a king and three, because it would have been too weak to raise pre-flop. Ford put him on king-jack or king-ten, maybe suited. While he thought about this, he kept looking at the widow’s hands, keeping as still as possible and his shoulders relaxed. Then he called the bet very softly and pushed his chips forward. He kept his eyes down when the Movie Star folded and then heard Zhou raise to two hundred and forty. Ford fought the urge to look up, or do anything. He now



knew where the other king was. The players behind Zhou folded and McCann called quickly. Ford hesitated a moment to look reluctant, and then called.

He liked where he was, sat between them, as invisible as possible as they stared each other down, figuring who had the higher kicker. His only danger was if either of them paired their other card to make a better full house. He needed the turn and river cards to be low and trust that both of them would only play a King with another high card, nine or higher.

The turn card arrived and it was the five of clubs. Zhou and McCann were cautious of each other now. McCann checked, conceding the action to Zhou as the aggressor. Ford checked too, and Zhou hesitated a little too long before betting another two forty, and that told Ford that Zhou was seeing if McCann would re-raise him and tell him something about his kicker. But McCann just called, and Ford limped in behind him.

He didn't dare look at the final card, so he looked at Zhou, waiting to see some change of expression as the river card was turned, the slightest flicker in his eyes. There was nothing, his eyes like glass, so Ford looked at the card himself. It was the seven of clubs. It was now up to the other two players to let Ford know if they had made a full house. McCann checked, and so Ford did too. Zhou looked at his diminished stack and Ford could tell he was holding his breath. He pushed the last of his chips forward.

The dealer counted and stacked the chips and announced the bet. 'All in for five hundred and twenty thousand.'

McCann was looking at Ford's cards and for the first time Ford knew he was worried. He had fallen in love with his hand, and been too focused on Zhou, and now he was committed. He was looking at Ford's stack, smaller than his own, and was calculating whether it was worth pushing Ford all in. If McCann had the full house, there would be no need for calculation, so Ford knew he didn't have it. McCann called, and began counting chips into the middle of the table.

Ford counted his own stack. He'd lost half a million, and if he called Zhou he would be committing over a million into the pot, almost half his stack. This was the moment, the point at which he needed to make his hero call. He could feel the wind of fortune switching direction around him like something special, drying the sweat on his back and making the hairs on his arms stand up. 'Call,' he said.

Zhou turned his cards over to show his king and a queen, and everyone at the table looked towards McCann. He showed his king of clubs, and then the nine of clubs. He had made a flush on the river but he had not raised. Ford had made him pause, made him think again, and now Ford had him beaten. He turned over his pair of threes and heard an intake of breath from the Widow.

Ford smiled at her as the dealer stacked the chips and then pushed them across the felt. He was trying to remember her first name. She couldn't be more than a year or two older than him, slim build, with the sort of sculpted shoulders that you only got from gym work. He thought she was the kind of woman that would have a personal trainer whose only job was to keep her limber. She was giving him a different look now, not so condescending, like she might be impressed. He didn't know if it was his skill in the hand, or the three million dollars that had just been pushed in front of him. His stack was now close to six million, and he wondered how big a stack you needed before you got a shot at a woman like that. McCann spoke and interrupted his train of thought.

'You've got a good poker face,' he said.

'It's because I'm half dead inside,' said Ford.

If McCann had pushed all in, he would have made Ford think again, make him wonder if he had the full house, and now Ford could see it all. The weakness in McCann that would let the Lau family get the better of him. Ford asked the dealer if he could colour up and he pushed forward his stack and she replaced it with five black plaques.

He liked the feel of them in his hand, the way that glossy plastic could somehow feel like a million dollars.

Zhou had stood up. The dealer asked if he wanted to re-buy but he shook his head, still smiling like a man who was just exactly as tough as he thought he was.

Ford watched him step away from the table and his eyes followed him all the way to the door.

‘Did I hurt his feelings?’ he said

‘He doesn’t have any,’ said McCann.

‘He seemed welded to those kings.’

‘He was never going to fold. It’s a face thing.’

Ford nodded. ‘You can lead a horse to water, but a donkey will follow you all the way to the river.’

McCann laughed at that, watching Ford running his fingers over the black plaques. ‘Does money won feel better than money earned?’

‘Or in your case, money earned for you by the sweat of other people’s labour.’

‘You’re playing with money got by hocking a diamond you stole from me. Don’t moralise.’

McCann’s stack was not much more than a million. Ford wondered what might happen if he won it all from him, whether McCann would buy in again.

‘I try not to get carried away by winning,’ said Ford. ‘It’s just a short-term buzz, a release of dopamine from the hypothalamus.’

McCann nodded. ‘And when you lose, the anterior lobe of the pituitary gland releases prolactin, which makes you feel low. Too much of that stuff causes impotence. That’s Darwin’s Law in action right there, strengthening the gene pool. Mother Nature doesn’t want losers to reproduce.’

Ford was looking at the Widow and she was still smiling at him. He remembered her name now. She was Trisha, a name that was not as classy as her image.

‘I should have paid more attention to you from the beginning,’ said McCann. ‘The way you handle yourself, I shouldn’t have pegged you for a loser.’

‘Right now, I seem to be ahead,’ said Ford, laying a hand on his chips, enjoying the shift in the instruments of fate that had favoured him.

‘You do your cynical smartarse routine but you listen and you learn things and you’re smarter than you let on. You don’t push.’

‘Didn’t you say you had bigger problems than me?’

‘There’s a whole conga line of people trying to screw up this deal,’ said McCann. ‘I’ve got two of the major multinationals trying to turn the government against me, and the courts. Those people I can deal with. I have no problem getting what I want from the politicians and the banks and the arse-kissers, but it’s always the little guys with fucked-up personalities that cause the trouble. The ones who won’t be bought and are too dumb to be threatened.’

‘I only remember the threats,’ said Ford. ‘I don’t think you ever tried to bribe me. If I want money from you, poker seems the easiest way to get it.’

‘Or you steal it. Steal my diamonds.’

‘Now you’re sounding like a sore loser.’

McCann’s face was beginning to betray his anger. ‘Don’t get cocky just because one hand went your way,’ he said. ‘The evening’s got a long way to go.’

‘Then let’s play.’

**24.**

The two doormen watched her as she came out of the gaming room, no suspicion on their faces, only curiosity, neither of them able to lift their eyes away from her legs. She tried a smile on them, laced it with sex and boredom, the same expression she'd seen on the Russian girls. She swung her hips a little too, giving them the catwalk strut. Their mouths were open now, enjoying the show, and they watched her walk through the metal detector and step into the lift.

She waited for the lift doors to close before she held the security card to the plate on the wall and her heart beat three times before the small green light came on behind the panel. She pressed the button for the twins' penthouse and held her breath until she felt the lift drop, leaving her knotted stomach feeling like it was floating in the air.

When the doors opened at her floor she poked her head out of the lift and looked up and down the corridor. It was empty, no sign of the Gurkha outside the twins' suite. She looked up at the black camera dome under the ceiling, and thought about who might be watching. She stepped out of the lift with all the swagger she could find, striding down the hallway to her hotel door like she owned the place, putting the card to the reader and proudly pushing open the door and stepping inside.

The room was dark, so she swept her arm across the wall, searching for the light switch. Her hand found it and flipped it and when the lights came on it showed her Alannah Doyle sitting on a dining chair in the middle of the room staring at her. A flicker of joy and relief shot through Kavanagh's chest like an electric shock before she saw that Doyle's eyes were dull, her skin pale and her mouth slack, twisted sideways in a grimace. She was upright in the chair, her hands resting in her lap, her head tilted to one side as if listening for something. Even from distance Kavanagh could see the broken capillaries in Doyle's eyes, the blush in her cheeks, and the ligature mark around

her neck. She needed no confirmation that she was dead, but still she walked across the room and put two fingers to Doyle's neck, felt the cold skin but no pulse. Doyle was wearing the loose linen shirt and drawstring pants she always wore as pyjamas at home in the evening. Her feet were bare, the soles dirty and the tops of her toes grazed from walking outdoors and maybe being dragged. Her sleeves had been rolled up, and there were cigarette burns up her forearms and ligature marks around her wrists. Kavanagh lifted her friend's arm to look at the marks, and it was loose. Rigor mortis had come and gone, and she had been dead for several hours. She had been tied to a chair, but not this one. She had been moved here, posed in the chair facing the door, waiting. Kavanagh didn't think it was an attempt to frame her, and not even a warning. This was Zhou taunting her, letting her know how powerless she was inside this hotel.

Kavanagh stared at Doyle and waited for the tears to come, but they didn't. All she had inside was emptiness, and that told her she had expected this. There had never really been any hope inside her; she had always known that she would find Alannah like this, the same way she had found Diane Ford. Now, sitting here with her eyes closed, she felt the hollowness at her centre start to fill, not with grief or even sorrow, but with rage. She took a deep breath, held it down, pushing the air down on top of her anger, regaining control, and when she opened her eyes she knew she had to think fast and act quickly.

Everyone had been in the gaming room when she had left it. Zhou had been playing poker with Ford and McCann. Singh had been by the door when she had walked through it. She couldn't remember seeing Zhou's henchmen after she had first arrived in the salon. If this was their work, they had been working on Zhou's orders.

She kicked off her heels and walked in her stocking feet to the bedroom and opened the bedside table, palming the little red telephone and holding it against her thigh, out of sight of the camera, while she walked to the bathroom. She closed the door and

leaned her back against it, and her thumbs hammered at the phone and she cursed as the screen lit up and the phone searched for a signal. She found the only number in the memory and stabbed at the call button. It rang only once before Iron Crutch's voice said without preamble, 'I told you only to use text.'

'I don't have time for that. Do you have access to hotel security?'

'Where are you now?'

'In my hotel room.'

'I told you the last time you texted me that I was close. I got access to the security cameras three minutes after that. I've got your room up now, but I can't see you.'

'I'm in the bathroom.'

'Come out in front of the camera.'

She stepped out of the bathroom and gave a smile to the camera, trying to imagine him someplace, peering into his computer screen. 'So what have you seen?' she asked. Her heart was pounding now, her voice rasping and her breath short. Iron Crutch's voice was calm and monotone.

'Nice underwear,' he said.

'You watched me get dressed?'

'I recorded it.'

'You're a sad little pervert.'

'I've been sitting here on my own. I need something to pass the time.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm still in the city, but not for long if this escalates.'

'Can you see Alannah?'

'I can now.'

'What else have you seen. Who brought her into the room?'

'I didn't see that. The cameras on your floor went dark for eight minutes. When they came back online, the guard in the corridor had gone and she was in the chair.'

'When was this?'

'Twenty-four minutes ago,' he said. 'Is she dead?'

'Strangled,' said Kavanagh, her breath returning, her voice cold and raw. 'They tortured her.'

The line went quiet. She gave him time to think of something to say, but he had no condolences for her. 'They would have been asking her questions about me and the Cult,' he said.

'What could she have told them?'

'She knew my name, that was it. They'd already cracked her computer, which would have led them to my caravan. My name is of no use to them.'

'Are you telling me they killed her for nothing?'

'No, they killed her to scare me, and it worked.'

Kavanagh let that hang, not letting her anger be diverted to Iron Crutch. She focused it back on Zhou before she said, 'You hide behind that alias, and that hive mind of yours. There is nothing that she could tell them.'

'That's the trouble with the triads,' said Iron Crutch. 'They work like corporations, or big families. They can only think in vertical hierarchies. They want to speak to the leader, always asking who is in charge. They can't comprehend how something like the Cult can exist, so formless, yet so well organised. Alannah thought that Iron Crutch was one person.'

Kavanagh thought about that, about how long she had been tortured, trying to get a name out of her of a man that barely existed.

'I can't keep calling you by that stupid fucking name,' said Kavanagh. 'Give me another.'



'My friends call me Sonny.'

'That's not any more mature than the last name.'

'It's the only one I'm going to give you.'

'Another alias?'

'After a fashion. Most Chinese people adopt a Western name for themselves, something that the *gweilo* can pronounce.'

Kavanagh leaned against the door frame and looked back into the main room at Alannah in the chair. 'Are you getting any closer to McCann?' she said

'Maybe. Doyle had tracked down a dozen accounts that McCann might be using to launder his money, but some of them are offshore. There's no way The Cult can hack a dozen banks simultaneously. We need to know which bank he is using, and the easiest way is to find where the Lau family has stashed his money.'

'What then?'

'Then I guess we'll try to hack the bank, but that's no easy thing. It will take teams of hackers from around the world, acting around the clock, chasing the sun. We'd have to get some Russians involved. They're the experts in that sort of shit, but they're surly bastards. It's one thing hacking a criminal's private system, quite another hacking a bank. That gets the Feds involved. If we are going to put ourselves in a shit sandwich between the Chinese fingernail police and the FBI and the Australian Federal Police then we want to be sure we get the right target.'

The line went quiet again, so Kavanagh gave him a moment before she said, 'Can you see every camera in the hotel?'

'Yes, but not all at the same time.'

'Can you see Zhou?'

He was laughing now. 'I'm on a laptop with a thirteen inch screen. It's not like I'm in the control room with a dozen monitors. I can see four camera feeds at a time.'

'He was in the gaming room ten minutes ago, at the poker table.'

'Hold on,' he said, and the line went quiet and then he said, 'He's not there now. I can't see him in the casino at all. He's not in the corridor either.'

'Where's his room? The twins said he had one of Robert's guest suites.' She thought that might be where Alannah had been held these last days, and the place she had died.

'I'd have to check the hotel registry and then find his camera feed. It might take a while.'

'I've got a security swipe card now,' said Kavanagh. 'Can you change my preferences to give me access to every room on every floor?'

'Might take a while,' he said. 'Does the card have a serial number?'

She found the card and examined it. It was plain white, without markings of any kind, not even the hotel logo. 'It's blank,' she said.

'Have you used it?'

'I came through my front door a few minutes ago.'

'Then I'll cross reference it and sort it out. Give me a few minutes, this laptop is cramping my style.' The line was quiet except for the distant tapping of his fingers on the keyboard. She thought she could hear him humming to himself, occasional words in Mandarin, then she heard a deep sigh.

'What's up?' she asked

His voice was urgent now. 'The cameras on your suite have gone dark again,' he said.

'What about the corridor outside.'

'It's the whole floor that's gone out,' he said. 'Someone's coming. You need to get out.'

'Get help,' said Kavanagh. 'Quickly.'

She cut the connection and turned off the phone, threw it back in the bedside drawer, and ran back into the living room. She went up to the door and put her eye to the peep hole. Zhou was on the other side of the door, his pockmarked face large and distorted in the lens, not two feet beyond the hole, raising his hand to put his security card to the lock. There was the dark shadow of another man behind him, the giant they called Bao, his huge shoulders blocking the light from the corridor.

Kavanagh took three steps backwards when she heard the click of the lock, and when the door swung inwards she launched herself forward and drove her fist hard into Zhou's face, getting some nose and mouth, putting as much body behind it as she could.

It surprised him, dazing him for a second, and she got a quick left right combination under his chin, snapping his head back, before he got his guard up and blocked her next punch. He put his head down and pushed her back away from the door and into the room.

Kavanagh went for him again, screaming, flailing her fists at him, her blows landing on his forearms, swatted away. Zhou planted his feet and launched a fierce right at her body, palm upwards, the heel of his hand landing directly over her solar plexus, driving the air out of her lungs and forcing her backwards. She staggered a couple of steps, then bent over, her hands on her knees, sucking for air. She clawed at the hem of her dress, her hand feeling for the knife in her stocking, but Zhou was already behind her. She felt the cord wrap around her neck and go taut and then he was pulling her upright, the cord biting into her throat, and she raised her hands to her neck, trying to get her fingers underneath it. She could feel it, cold and smooth and unyielding, a length of plastic-coated electrical cable.

Zhou's hands were behind her neck now, pulling her backwards into the room. He held both ends of it in one hand, pulling a chair away from the table with the other and

then dragging her, pushing her down until she was forced to sit, her head pulled back, pinned to the chair.

The big man was in front of her now, towering over her. He grabbed her wrists, pulling them away from her throat, forcing them up and forward, putting more tension in the cord around her neck. Kavanagh looked into the man's face, saw the blank look in his eyes, and then her vision started to blur and she felt a lightness in her head, a strange euphoria, and thought that this must be how the others had gone, slipping into a weird blissful darkness. As her vision dimmed she felt the cord go slack and the air return to her lungs and Zhou's voice hissing in her ear.

'The Cult of the Horse,' he was saying. 'Tell me where they are. I know they are close.'

She was hearing his voice for the first time, his accent thick but his English better than he had pretended. But she couldn't see his face, her vision was full of Bao, the round cheeks, the heavy jowls.

She had no answer to the question. Her only link to the Cult was the phone in the next room. She would die the same way as Alannah. Iron Crutch had been right; the best way to fight these people was from a long way away, anonymously, with a legion to take your place.

She felt the ligature tighten again, her eyesight start to darken. This is how it would be: Zhou pulling her to the brink of unconsciousness, then letting her drift back, repeating the cycle. How many more times before he bored of it or realised she didn't have the answer he needed?

As the room receded into shadow she saw the broad silhouette of Bao in front of her, and beyond him another shape, taller than Bao and broader across the shoulders, and then there was a shout and Bao was releasing her hands and turning and Zhou had relaxed the cord.

Her vision returned and she saw Singh pulling Bao away from her, spinning him around and pushing him towards the wall. Her hands were free now, and the pressure at her throat had been released. Her hands crawled up her thighs and lifted the hem of her dress, and at last found the blade. She formed a fist around it, tip down, and then she was swinging it downwards and behind her. She felt it hit something hard, Zhou's knee she hoped, and she heard him shout in pain and felt her head pulled sideways as his knee buckled and his weight shifted. She swung again, lifting her elbow to get the blade higher, aiming for his balls, but feeling the blade hit the muscle in his thigh, her hand sliding down the blade, feeling it bite into the palm of her hand. The cord went slack and she grabbed at it with her left hand, getting her fingers under it, pulling it away from her windpipe, but Zhou snatched it tighter, trapping her fingers, dragging the chair backwards.

She stabbed again with the knife, lifting it high, flailing backwards over her shoulder, trying to cut his hand where he held the wire, feeling the blade tear flesh and jarring against his knuckles. Then she was free, the cord gone from her neck, and she pushed herself forwards out of the chair, stumbling to her feet. She saw Singh wrestling with Bao, his turban pulled apart, his hair spilling free, his tunic torn. He had his arm around Bao's neck from behind, and was trying to get his knee up in to the small of his back.

Kavanagh heard a grunt behind her and turned to see Zhou lurching towards her, his hands raised, blood dripping from his knuckles. She dodged to the side, keeping the chair between them. Zhou flung it aside and then edged towards her, his hands up by his face in a boxing stance. She kept the knife pointed at him, her arm extended, elbow bent, stepping slowly backwards, waiting for him to attack, the blood from her hand making the blade slippery. Then he came at her, lunging forward, throwing a right uppercut at her chin, but as he put his weight forward on his right leg he winced at the

pain, and his weight shifted and Kavanagh saw her chance. She jabbed the knife forward as he weaved sideways, the blade evading his guard, the tip of the knife stabbing into his throat just above his shirt collar. Blood spurted from the small puncture wound and she knew she had hit the artery. Zhou's eyes widened in surprise and he clutched at his neck, blood spraying through his fingers. He staggered backwards until the backs of his knees met the chair and he sat down hard, his fingers still trying to seal the wound but the blood now soaking the front of his white shirt. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but the only noise was a wet croak as he drowned in his own blood. He stared at Kavanagh in disbelief until the life went out of his eyes.

Singh appeared beside her, carefully winding his hair back into his turban. Kavanagh looked over her shoulder at Bao, slumped against the wall.

'I broke his neck,' said Singh. He'd finished with his turban and was fussing with a ripped button on his tunic. He looked at Zhou and Doyle sitting dead in their chairs, almost side by side.

'I'll call room service,' he said, 'see if we can't clean up this mess.'

**25.**

It had been nearly two hours since Ford had taken Zhou's stack, and he hadn't won a hand since. He kept looking towards the bar, waiting for Kavanaugh to return, and the more time went past, the worse he played. He bet the next hand and lost, and knew his mind was on her, not on his game. He was spending time looking at the people in the room, searching for her face in the crowd, rather than watching the other players, identifying their tells, memorising the patterns in their play.

He counted his stack reflexively. It had shrunk by a couple of million, some of it lost to McCann but most of it to the man that looked like Mao Zedong, who hadn't smiled once at winning. But his stack was still more than twice McCann's, who'd been winning slowly and recouped most of his losses. He was now sitting on two million. The widow had left the table an hour ago, saying something about getting her beauty sleep, happy that she had ended up ahead. Mao didn't look like he needed sleep, ever. His eyes were as hooded and weary as when he started. The table was reduced to five players now. The Movie Star had taken a ten minute break in Robert's office and had returned with glassy eyes and a sudden desire to engage the table in conversation, which was mostly about himself. He reeled off a list of Chinese actresses that he had known intimately, but only one of the names meant anything to Ford, and only because she had taken legal action against the last man that had bragged about bedding her.

The Racing Driver had taken a break too, and when he came back he had changed his clothes and had a different Russian on his arm. Ford wondered how much money and how many girls he went through in an evening, and whether the girls got bored of him before he tired of them.

It was past one o'clock now, but the room hadn't thinned out. If anything, more people were arriving. There seemed to a buzz rising in the room, and not connected to

any of the gaming tables. The poker table was now the only table with empty chairs, every seat at the blackjack and baccarat tables was taken. Patti was still holding court at the baccarat table with the older wives, and there was the steady clatter of chips.

The poker game had reached that time in the small hours where it seemed mechanical, into the weary phase, after the initial buzz had worn off, the conversation exhausted, the players only keeping counsel with their cards, folding weak hands one after the other, waiting patiently for the right hand and trying to stay focused. This was exactly the time when mistakes were made if your attention wandered.

Ford had thought his luck would change after he won the big pot: that he'd get a rush of good cards, but they hadn't come. Or maybe they had come and he had been too preoccupied to notice, or had played them badly. He was tired and bored, fighting his listlessness, trying to stop himself from thinking about her. He had thought about looking for her, but she had taken the security key and he had no way of leaving the gaming room. He was on the point of asking Singh to look for her, even if it compromised them, but when he looked across the room, hoping to see his turban above the heads of the crows, he couldn't find him.

He saw Sofia though, still working the room, looking as fresh as when they'd arrived. She caught his eye and smiled, but it seemed fake to him now. He was tiring of it all: the poker in front of him and the games that Robert and the twins were playing. He needed to concentrate on his poker, stop betting foolishly and chasing poor hands to the river hoping to hit something. He had to tighten his game and focus on breaking Alan McCann.

The dealer button was in front of him when the next hand was dealt and he turned the corner of his cards and looked at them through one half-closed eye. He had been dealt the Queen and Jack of Hearts. It had been so long since he had seen a face card that now he had two of them it seemed that they were laughing at him. He waited until



the vision had passed before he put the cards back down, placed a chip over them and vowed not to look at them again.

They were the best cards he had been dealt in the last twenty hands: two face cards, suited connectors, while he was on the button. He knew he had to play aggressively with such good pocket cards in late position. Only Mao called the big blind, and when it came around to McCann he raised to one hundred and twenty thousand.

This made Ford think. McCann didn't normally show such aggression before the flop, and when he did, he usually kept it to three times the big blind. He had taken the initiative and Ford's initial promise to himself to show strength had to be reassessed. Now he told himself to be cautious until he had more information. He decided to make the most of having position on McCann and limped in by calling the raise.

Everyone else at the table folded, scared off by McCann's big raise, and that left him head-to-head with Ford. Ford turned to look at him, but McCann made no acknowledgement. He was staring at his own hands, the fingers laced together over his cards, trying to keep very still and not give anything away, but his very act of concentration told Ford that McCann wasn't bluffing. He had strong cards and was leading out with them.

Ford kept his eyes locked on McCann's face as the three flop cards were turned, hoping for a flicker of information, but McCann was in lockdown, his body and face rigid. Ford turned his eyes slowly to look at the flop: the Jack of Spades, Two of Hearts and the Four of Hearts. He had hit with the Jack, and the other two cards gave him a thirty-five per cent chance at a flush draw. He bit down on his excitement, measured his breathing, and waited for McCann to make his move.

McCann sat and thought for a moment, long enough for Ford to look at the other players around the table. They looked uninterested. The Racing Driver was rubbing his eyes and looking at his watch, counting his stack, calculating how much money he was

down. It was over a million, and Ford wondered how much that compared to the amount of cash his racing team burned through in the course of a weekend, and whether the man took a break during the middle of a race to get laid.

McCann brought him back to the game by betting another hundred and twenty thousand. It gave Ford no more information. It was a standard continuation bet, which implied that his hand hadn't been strengthened by the flop, or he could be trying to learn something about Ford's hand by encouraging him to raise. Ford decided to go with his first instinct and use his position and his bigger stack to attack. He raised to two hundred and forty thousand and McCann called him without hesitation.

Ford thought about this now. There was no possibility of a straight with the cards showing, and it was unlikely that the two or the four would have been much use to him if he had strong pocket cards. So Ford put him either on a strong flush draw like himself, or he had a strong pocket pair that had not improved with the flop. It was unlikely he had jacks with two already in play, so Ford put him on Queens or better. He hoped it was Queens, so that he already had one of McCann's outs.

Ford watched the dealer flip the fourth card and he waited a second before he looked at it. It was the Jack of Diamonds. He now had triple Jacks, and still had his flush draw.

McCann checked, and Ford looked at him to see if he was looking to trap him into a check raise. If he had a high pocket pair, he was behind. He was staring at his hands. If he had been staring at his chips, Ford would have taken that as a sign that he was intending to bet. Everything in front of him told Ford that he was ahead.

He looked across at the bar one last time, hoping for a sign, for his talisman to return, and there she was, staring right back at him. She looked out of breath, her chest rising and falling, her eyes filled with fear. She had a red silk scarf tied loosely around her neck, out of place with the black dress. She raised a hand in his direction,

beckoning him to her, and he saw the narrow bandage wrapped around it, strapping her palm. Now he noticed the other changes: her swollen top lip, the red rings around her eyes, and he wanted to go to her, but the dealer was calling his attention back to the game.

‘The bet is with you, sir.’

He was still looking at Kavanagh, her eyes wide now, imploring him, and he said ‘All in.’

He barely registered McCann saying ‘I call it.’ But a murmur that went around the room, and the crowd pushed closer, eager to watch, blocking his view of the bar. When he turned back to look at McCann he saw that he was smiling as he pushed all his chips forward, and he didn’t like it. The dealer was counting the chips, her fingers moving swiftly, gathering the chips into stacks, and over her shoulder he saw Sofia, standing by the window. He had not noticed her there. She had been in the shadows, silhouetted against the city lights, but now she had stepped forward into the light to see the hand play out.

‘One million six hundred and thirty thousand,’ said the dealer after counting McCann’s remaining stack. Ford counted the same amount and pushed it forward.

‘Please show your cards,’ said the dealer.

McCann was in a hurry. He put down his jack of clubs and ace of spades and Ford’s heart felt like a bowling ball rolling slowly down a flight of wooden stairs. He showed his jack and queen and knew he was beaten. Triple jacks in both hands and McCann’s ace the better kicker.

A crowd had gathered around the table to watch the dealer turn the final river card. Ford could not bear to see, so he looked at Sofia. She seemed an island of calm in the turmoil of the room, and as he watched she raised a hand to her throat and laid two fingertips on the red diamond. She closed her eyes and her lips moved in silent prayer.

Ford heard the gasp of the crowd and a deep sigh from McCann beside him as the final card was turned, and then he allowed himself to look down at the table and there he saw the queen of diamonds. He had hit his full house and taken down the pot. McCann was up and out of his seat, trying to conceal his fury. Ford stood up too and offered his hand to McCann, who looked down at it and looked ready to spit.

‘Fuck the river,’ he said. ‘I got hit by the deck.’

‘It was a bad beat,’ said Ford. ‘I played that badly and got lucky.’

‘That kind of luck is spelled with a capital F,’ said McCann, his jaw clenched. Then he turned and pushed his way through the crowd towards Robert’s office. Ford watched him go and when he turned back to the table Sofia was standing beside him. She smiled her eyes creased, her joy genuine.

‘You beat him,’ she said, as if that was all there was to it. Ford leaned across the table and scooped up the nine cards still lying face up. The dealer raised a hand to stop him but then she caught the look on Sofia’s face and let him take them, turning her attention to stacking the chips. Ford put eight of the cards in his pocket and gave the last one to Sofia. She turned it to the light so she could see it, and smiled. ‘The Queen of Diamonds,’ she said. ‘Is that who I am?’

‘A deck of cards is the most perfect hierarchy,’ said Ford. ‘Each card is a master to those below it, and a lackey to those above.’

Sofia leaned forward, her lips parted, making to kiss him but he leaned away from her. He reached up to her neck and grabbed the diamond in his fist and pulled down on it until he felt the clasp on the slender gold chain snap. Then he turned away from her and pushed through the crowd, forcing his way towards Kavanagh at the bar.

**26.**

Ford was past the baccarat table and only a few metres from Kavanagh, still pushing his way through the crowd, drawing scowls from those he jostled, when the entrance doors to the gaming room swung open, parted by a pair of hotel security guards, broad shouldered Chinese men in black tunics, their thick necks straining at the high collars. A hush descended on the room, the music from the piano stopped on cue, the rattle of chips and the murmur of conversation from the gaming tables died away. And then William Lau entered the room.

He was in a wheelchair, his right hand raised in a static greeting, a statesman's smile curling his lips. Even in the wheelchair he seemed tall, his back erect, his chin up and his head held steady. His thinning hair was dyed black and combed backwards across his head, slick with brilliantine, the marks of the comb showing clearly. His eyes were just as black and shone under heavy eyebrows. They darted left and right, scanning each face in turn, widening in recognition at each friend, nodding at some, raising his hand to others.

He was being pushed slowly into the room by a tall, elegant woman with high cheekbones and almond eyes, her hair as black as his, cut in a fierce French bob that told Ford this was Rosita Coutinho, William Lau's second wife and mother to the twins. Her skin seemed taut against her cheeks, burnished to a sheen, so tight that it seemed to prevent her from smiling. She walked smoothly behind the wheelchair with the grace of a dancer in flat-soled pumps, and Ford found it impossible to guess her age. She seemed only a few years older than her daughter. He would need to see her from closer, under brighter lights, to see the traces of her age that the surgeons had missed. She seemed unimpressed by the crowd and the theatre of their entrance, her face a mask of ennui until she saw Sofia and Robert coming out of the office. They each held an

envelope. Robert's was red, a colour that matched the handkerchief poking from the pocket of his tuxedo and the cummerbund around his narrow waist. He slipped it inside his jacket when he saw Rosita looking at him. Sofia held a plain white envelope, clutching it to her chest, almost invisible against her white outfit until she too slipped it inside her jacket.

Rosita beckoned them to her with just a flare of her eyes and the slightest movement on her fingers above the handle of the wheelchair.

The crowd had slowly gathered in front of the door, parting either side of the wheelchair to form an impromptu honour guard through which Rosita slowly pushed her husband, giving him time to shake the hands thrust out in front of him and exchange pleasantries in Cantonese and English.

Ford caught sight of Patti standing by the baccarat table, still surrounded by her entourage of wealthy old women, bristling at the sight of Rosita. He saw her eyes move around the room, taking in the gushing expressions of the people waiting to greet her ex-husband, and she fixed her face into a mask of determination and then marched up the aisle formed by the crowd and stepped behind the wheelchair. William ignored her, his eyes and smile directed at the well-wishers. Rosita tried to ignore her too, but found herself pushed sideways by a subtle hip and shoulder from Patti, making her relinquish her hold on one handle of the wheelchair. Patti grabbed at it, and side by side the two wives pushed the old man towards the centre of the room.

Rosita kept her eyes ahead, the same stare of boredom returning. Patti kept shifting her glance sideways at the taller, younger woman and as they passed in front of him Ford looked down and saw that Patti was walking on tip toe, not even her strappy heels high enough to compensate for the difference in their height.

Sofia and Robert approached their father, stepping in front of him and bowing their heads dutifully. Robert held out the red envelope in both hands and Lau took it,

slipping it inside his jacket. Son and daughter then stepped aside, letting the wheelchair pass between them, then joined the procession, Robert by Patti's side and Sofia next to Rosita, the resemblance between mother and daughter even more apparent now they were together. Paulo appeared through the crowd and stepped between his mother and his sister, taking each by the arm, and the three struck a pose as if waiting for a photographer. Robert saw their catwalk smiles and gave them some movie-star glamour right back, a red carpet grin that lit up the room. The entire family was now standing in line in the centre of the room, and only Patti's smile looked amateur and forced.

At the end of the aisle stood Alan McCann with his daughter Ellen. She was leaning against him, her arm looped through her father's, tilting her head to one side, almost resting it on his shoulder. She wore a smile of angelic sweetness, the very opposite of everything Ford knew about her, but she seemed to be doing it without irony. Ford saw a look pass between her and Robert Lau, and her smile got brighter, and her eyes lit up, and the junkie sickness seemed to fall away from her and the happy girl underneath shone through.

Ford turned to look at Kavanagh now. She was still by the bar, watching the performance the same way he was. The crowd had drifted away from her as they jostled to form a circle around the two families, sensing that the old man was about to speak.

Ford stepped up next to Kavanagh and took her hand. She didn't return the pressure, her hand cold and limp by her side. He was close enough now to see the bruises underneath her make-up and the swollen lip. She didn't look at him, her eyes were glassy and empty and fixed on the Lau family.

Ford leaned close to her ear and spoke softly. 'What happened?'

'I found Allannah,' she said, her voice a whisper. 'Upstairs, in our room. She's dead.'

Ford looked at her face, but Kavanagh's eyes were looking beyond him, into the distance. He increased the pressure on her hand and still got no response.

'Who hurt you?' he said.

'Zhou,' she replied. She said it quietly and without emotion, as if the answer was so obvious that the question didn't need to have been asked.

'Where is he?'

'He's dead too now. Don't worry about him.'

Ford leaned closer, squeezing her hand. 'I'm worried about you.'

'But you weren't there,' she said, her voice seemed disembodied, her lips barely moving. 'Singh is taking care of it.'

'Are you hurt?'

'I'm fine,' she said. 'Quiet now.'

Through the heads of the crowd Ford could see that William Lau was struggling to stand. Rosita stepped to his side and took his right arm, and not to be outdone Patti grabbed at his left and together they steadied him as he pushed himself out of the chair.

Once he was standing he shook his arms free and stretched himself to his full height, lifted his chin and waited for the crowd to fall silent.

When he spoke his voice was quiet and authoritative, and the crowd leaned closer to hear him. Only the Russian girls looked bored by it all, perplexed at the show of deference towards this fossil in a wheelchair.

Lau had no trace of a Chinese accent, English private school pronunciation of the kind that even the English sought to hide these days. Ford could not catch all of what he was saying, since the old man was facing away from him, addressing himself to McCann and his daughter, but it seemed to be only platitudes. Lau was saying that he and his wife had only just arrived from Macau, and that travel tired him now. The time



for formal speeches and toasts to celebrate the engagement would be tomorrow, when he would be fresher, invigorated by the thought of young love.

His last comment brought a ripple of laughter, and then he was done. He beckoned McCann and Ellen towards him, and when they stepped forward Lau took the daughter's hand, kissed it, then turned her towards his son and placed her hand in his. Then he was shaking McCann's hand, showing a firm grip and leaning in to share a joke with him, showing the crowd that he knew how to act around Australians. He had the red envelope now, and he pressed it into McCann's free hand, still pumping his right hand, still laughing in his ear.

McCann slipped the envelope in his side pocket, then reached into his inside pocket and took out a similar red envelope. He broke Lau's clinch and then bowed his head, offering Lau the envelope and watched as Lau palmed it into his pocket.

The crowd watched for a moment, the two fathers talking and joking, and then they realised the festivities were over and they drifted back to the gaming tables and the music and conversation returned.

Ford dropped Kavanagh's hand and stepped up behind Sofia, slipping his arm through hers.

'What's in the red envelope?' he asked.

She didn't turn to him. She was still watching her father, her face fixed with her catwalk grin.

'It's a *hongbao*. A traditional gift presented at holidays and family gatherings.'

'I know the tradition,' hissed Ford. 'I asked what was in the envelope.'

'In China, the family of the husband offers a bride payment. It's to compensate them for the loss of their daughter.'

'And how much has your father given McCann?'

'All of it.'

'His own money? Laundered through Macau? That's not much of a gift.'

'There's more on top. Lau family money.'

'To help him refloat his business?'

'I just watched Robert write out the cheque in his office.'

Ford was watching Ellen and Robert hand in hand, and trying to calculate how much the partnership was worth. 'What was in the *hongbao* that McCann gave your father?'

'That I don't know,' said Sofia. 'Share certificates, bearer bonds, lottery tickets. Who knows?'

'What's in your white envelope?' asked Ford.

'It's a gift,' said Sofia. 'One for you.' She pulled it from her jacket pocket and held it low at her side for him to take. 'Your winnings from the game, less the amount I staked you.'

'Your family seems to like giving people their own money and acting like it's a gift.'

Sofia was rubbing her neck, her fingers running over the small red weal where Ford had torn the diamond from her throat. 'Consider it a peace offering,' she said. 'Robert wrote me the cheque just now in his office, as a favour to me.'

Ford took the envelope and pulled out the cheque, keeping it low by his side. He looked at the amount and the payee and he frowned. 'It's made out to you.'

'Of course. He wouldn't make it out to you. He knows your game.'

'I can't cash this.'

'I can make it over to you whenever I choose.'

'It's from the same bank account that he wrote McCann's cheque?'

Sofia nodded slowly. 'And that is my gift to you,' she said.

**27.**

Kavanagh was already at the end of the corridor outside the lift by the time Ford caught up with her. Her mouth was set in a hard line as she put the swipe card up against the reader, using her body to shield what she was doing from the security staff by the door to the gaming room.

Ford saw the card and raised an eyebrow.

‘Roth gave it to me,’ she said. She could see the next question forming in his mind, his mouth begin to open, but then the doors chimed and opened.

She pushed him inside saying, ‘I don’t know why he gave it to me. He has his own agenda, and we’ll just have to wait for him to show it to us.’

She pushed the button for the twins’ penthouse floor and when the lift started moving she closed her eyes and Ford watched her try to control her breathing, upset and losing her cool. When she opened her eyes Ford found she was looking at him. His mouth opened again to speak but she put a finger to his lips to silence him, and they stood like that until the doors opened again.

Kavanagh went to the door to their suite and opened it with the swipe card, and once through the door she put her hand on the wall of the living room, lifted her right foot and pulled off her high heel shoe with a deep sigh. She threw it across the room, watched it bounce off the couch and clatter onto the coffee table. She threw the other shoe after it and stood for a moment scrunching her bare toes into the thick carpet. Ford hovered behind her by the door. The room didn’t look disturbed, no sign of a fight. When she walked towards the bedroom he followed.

She lay down on the bed on her side, facing away from him, silent and contained. He walked around to the far side of the bed so he could look at her. Her eyes were open,

staring into the distance, not looking at him or at anything, staying inside herself, hard to reach. There was a vulnerable look too, a glimpse of the woman who could be afraid.

He threw his jacket over a chair, kicked off his own shoes, and sat down on the bed, pulling at his tie, glad to be rid of it. He lay down beside her, listening to her breathing, and when he thought she was calm he said, 'Where did it happen?'

'In the other room,' she said, her voice small and without any emotion in it now. 'She was tied to a chair and tortured by Zhou. He was going to kill me, but I stopped him.'

'The place is spotless.'

'Singh,' she said, as if that explained everything.

'What did he do with Alannah? And Zhou?'

Kavanagh just shrugged and moved herself closer to him, pressing her forehead to the starched cotton sleeve below his shoulder, pulling her knees up, laying her arm across his chest.

He looked down at her face, the white make-up streaked through with tears, the mascara running around her eyes. He undid his cufflink and folded down the French cuff and used the end of it to wipe away the mascara, using her own tears to wash away the foundation, wanting to see her bare face underneath, the freckles and the bruises and the split lip. When he had finished she opened her eyes and she looked different. Something new in her eyes, or something gone from them. She stared at him for a moment and then her eyes widened as she remembered something. She uncurled herself and sat up, reaching into the bedside drawer and finding the red phone. She punched the buttons and held it to her ear.

There were no pleasantries. She just said, 'Can you disable all the door locks in this suite? I don't want anyone else coming in here tonight.'

She listened and then she said, 'Do it,' and hung up. She pulled up the hem of her dress and looked at where the top of her stocking was shredded from where she pulled out the knife blade.

'These things are killing me,' she said, rolling them down, her fingers tracing the line of a scratch on her thigh and making a circle round a bruise, livid purple against the pale white of her skin.

She stood up and fumbled for the zip of her dress, her arms flailing over her shoulders. Ford was about to move, come up behind her and unzip her, when she lost patience, grabbing the hem of the dress and yanking it up, wrenching it over her shoulders, cursing as the zip burst and the seams started to rip. She swore again when the zip caught in her hair, twisting her body until she was free of the dress.

'Fuck this thing,' she said, hurling it across the room. She ran a hand through her hair and then noticed the suspender belt, the clips swinging free. She pulled it off and threw it in the same direction as the dress, then stood catching her breath, dressed only in the black silk underwear, her hands on her hips and her chest rising and falling.

She lay back down on the bed and curled up next to Ford. He put his arm around her shoulder and his hand landed on the black fabric of her bra, the silk sliding beneath his fingers.

'This feels nice,' he said.

'It's the only thing I'm keeping,' she said. Her voice was small, her breathing shallow. 'I hate those crippling fucking shoes.'

'I like the dress.'

'It's got blood on it. I have to destroy it.'

She went quiet then, thinking, forming her next question.

'So are you going to keep that red diamond?'

'Why wouldn't I?'

'You never told me you took it. We were in that bunker together, all that gold and all those guns. What else did you take?'

'There was a felt bag,' said Ford. 'I found it in a suitcase full of watches. It fitted right in my hand. It was full of loose diamonds. Mostly white, and that one red one.'

'I didn't think that was how you worked.'

'How's that?'

'Sneaky,' she said. Then she sat up and leaned over him, staring into his eyes, wanting to see how he reacted to her next question.

'Let me ask you something,' she said. 'When you first called me, you were at your house. You went straight back there after the police released you. You broke the tape on a crime scene and walked right in. Why were you there? You'd gone back to see if the diamonds were still there.'

Ford was fighting to keep eye contact, and he lost the battle. He closed his eyes and nodded.

Kavanagh sighed. 'You thought she'd been killed by someone looking for the diamonds?'

'Until I found them in the house.'

'Where are the others, the white ones?'

'Hidden again, at the house.'

'But you kept the red one in your pocket'

'Just a little walking-around money.' His eyes widened, mischief in them, and she laughed, lying down beside him.

'You have good eyes,' she said. 'Not kind, but they don't lie, and they don't look away much.'

'That time in Marble Bar,' said Ford, staring up at the ceiling, imagining stars above him. 'We lay in the hot sand, and I told you that the next time we were together I'd give you the five-star treatment.'

'You gave me this? I thought all this was on the twins' dime?'

'Yeah, well, I'm a cheap date.'

Kavanagh felt herself relaxing, liking how he could be serious and still make it fun.

'This isn't a date,' she said. 'That's not what we're doing here.'

'I haven't forgotten for a second why we're here, but it can wait a little. Don't we get a time out?'

'I guess,' she said. 'At least until the bank opens tomorrow.'

'The cheque?'

'McCann has one too. I don't think he'll hang on to it too long, especially when he finds out that Zhou is dead. He's going to be spooked and want to run, and he'll need his cash.'

'I thought the idea was for the hacker to find the money trail?'

'Maybe, but it's no use if McCann takes his cash and runs. It might get Robert Lau, but McCann will be gone.'

'I don't care about McCann any more. Zhou killed Diane. He killed Alannah. We've had our revenge.'

Kavanagh thought about that. She remembered watching Zhou at the card table, imagining her revenge, but it wasn't like the fantasy she'd had in the gaming room. It hadn't changed anything.

'Zhou killed them, but Robert pulled his strings.'

'Or his mother did.'

'You don't want revenge on them?'

‘Maybe,’ said Ford. ‘I’d like to talk to Robert and McCann in private. I’ve got something to say to them, but not quite yet. I don’t know how to say it, but I will.’

‘The family brought us here. It’s fate.’

‘It is. But is it our fate or theirs?’

‘It doesn’t matter. It has to end.’

He put his hand on her head and ran his fingers through her hair. ‘And me and you in this room together. Is that fate?’

She raised her head to look at him and in that moment he saw her vulnerable side again, behind her eyes, and he kissed her. She let him do it, but didn’t open her lips, watching him with her eyes open.

‘You kissed me,’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ said Ford. ‘How was it?’

‘You ruined it with that cheesy line about fate,’ she said. ‘And then you rushed it. You can do better.’

‘You want me to try again?’

‘Get on with it,’ she said.

He kissed her again, and this time she responded, still keeping her eyes open, but softening now. She reached down and pulled at his trouser belt.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Anything I want.’

‘I love it when you use that voice,’ said Ford. ‘It makes me feel inadequate and horny at the same time.’

She pushed him away, tears in her eyes but her mouth smiling. ‘Turn the light out,’ she said. ‘Get into bed.’

By the time he got out of his clothes and found the light switch she was naked under the sheet, the black silk stretched across the floor.



Her skin felt cool to his touch and she had a different scent, a perfume as expensive as the clothes but belonging to someone else. He buried his nose in her neck and waited until he could smell her skin under the perfume.

It didn't take him long to get to know her body again. It wasn't like the time before. There was no hurry, no rush for either of them. It wasn't sweaty. It was nice, and it was tender. When he entered her she breathed out a sigh he had not heard before, and as they moved together she slowly came out of herself, arching her back. The curtains were open, city light spilling through, a faint glow that let him see her face in a way she would never recognise herself, a secret Kavanagh, her face close enough to see into her eyes and know what she was feeling. He said nothing, she would know how he felt.

Later she lay with her head on his shoulder again and he could feel her breath on his neck, soft and steady. He thought she had drifted off to sleep, but then she spoke.

'You have a nice effect on me, Ford.' Her voice had changed, the tenderness and the fun gone out of it, the hardness returning.

He was aware of a strange feeling, lying in the dark with her, that the vulnerable woman he had glimpsed had withdrawn back inside, that the cop in her was returning, regrouping, perhaps not even aware of it as she lay in his arms.

'I don't think I have much of an effect on anyone,' he said. 'I'm not any closer to knowing you.'

'There doesn't have to be anyone who understands you. There just has to be someone who wants to.'

She pulled herself closer to him and kissed his neck.

'I'm not sure I understand myself,' he said. 'I don't know why I'm here any more. I don't want to be here. I don't want to be inside myself, but I can't get out. This isn't me.'

'But you're still angry?'

'All I can feel is hate.'

'You need to keep that wound fresh. You're going to need it.'

'But I hate them all. I can't even tell the bad guys from the good any more.'

'Well, I still can,' said Kavanagh.

Ford was thinking that maybe he was the one who was changing. Becoming someone else while she was the same woman who'd spent all her adult life as a cop.

'My hate feels like a solid thing,' he said. 'Something weighing me down.'

'That's because you haven't got used to it yet. It's not something wild and unpredictable any more. It's a rock and you've got to build yourself on top of it. A foundation stone.'

'Will I ever get rid of it?'

'I don't know,' said Kavanagh. 'I hang around you so you won't die. I can't make you live.'

**28.**

Ford was woken by daylight streaming in through the window. He remembered leaving the curtains open in the night so he could watch Kavanagh sleeping in the faint mix of moonlight and streetlight, and now he regretted it.

He put the pillow over his head and tried to go back to sleep, rolling sideways to feel the touch of her skin but only finding a warm indentation in the bed where she had slept.

He looked out from under the pillow and saw her leaning against the bathroom door, her hips pushed forward, pulling on her jeans. Her skin was flushed pink, her face scrubbed clean of make-up, her hair still wet from the shower. She wore her old white T-shirt, which seemed brighter than before, and her motorcycle jacket was hanging on the knob of the door. She caught him watching her and held his eyes as she sucked in her belly and buttoned up her jeans.

‘You’re dressed like your old self,’ said Ford, ‘but you look different.’

She sat down on the edge of the bed, her back to him, and pulled on her motorcycle boots.

‘They cleaned and pressed my clothes,’ she said. ‘I kicked them off yesterday and left them on the floor. Looked for them this morning and they were hanging in the closet. They bleached my shirt and pressed creases into my jeans, for fuck’s sake. Who does that?’

She stood up and put on the jacket, then looked at the clock beside the bed.

‘It’s past nine,’ she said. ‘You’d better get a move on, sunshine.’

Ford sat up. ‘If you’d woken me earlier I could have joined you in the shower.’

She looked at him, and her expression was somewhere between pity and disgust. She walked out of the bedroom and left him to get dressed. He found his clothes from

the night before strewn across the floor and they smelled of cigar smoke and stale alcohol. He walked naked to the closet and found the jeans and denim shirt he'd been wearing when he arrived at the hotel, and they too had been cleaned and pressed.

He took a quick shower and dressed and when he walked out into the living room Kavanagh was standing by the window with her arms folded, looking down Adelaide Terrace, watching the morning traffic move towards the city, down the canyon between the two rows of office towers that lined the ridge on which the city stood.

'You won't be able to see him leave from here,' said Ford.

'Then let's get down to street level,' she said. She walked past him to the door, checked the spy hole to see that the corridor was empty, and then went out, leaving the door open for Ford to follow. He stepped into the lift behind her as she pressed the lowest button for the basement car park. 'We can get out that way without passing security,' she said.

The doors opened onto the undercroft car park, and their footsteps echoed as they walked across the bare concrete slab. The basement was gloomy, banks of strip lights along the low roof the only illumination. Kavanagh kept to the shadows, weaving between parked cars and concrete columns, watching for cameras. At the far end of the car park was a roped-off area where the white Bentley sat, recently washed and waxed. Beside it was a black stretch limo, the private licence plate declaring the hotel's name.

'Where's your Ducati?' asked Ford.

'I don't know,' said Kavanagh. 'They were supposed to bring it back from Scarborough. We're on foot today.'

She was walking quickly now, leading Ford towards where daylight was streaming down the exit ramp. Ford kept up, his breathing shallow as they walked up the ramp and ducked under the striped boom gate that blocked the exit. Then they were out on the street, out of sight of the main entrance to the hotel.

'This way,' said Kavanagh, leading Ford away from the entrance, down the hill to the river foreshore, then along towards the city until they reached the Concert Hall. She bounded up the wide steps two at a time, skirting the Hall to bring them back onto Adelaide Terrace and the steady stream of city traffic. There were pedestrians now, office workers and shoppers walking towards the high rise, standing in line at bus stops, and Ford nearly lost sight of Kavanagh in the crowd. He had to dodge through the throng, and when she set off across the road he had to run to keep up, and nearly missed her when she stepped into a narrow shopping arcade that lead under an office tower. He found her standing outside a phone shop.

'We need to get you a phone so we can keep in touch,' she said, then went inside.

Ford caught the attention of a bored girl in a crumpled uniform who was admiring her own nail extensions. He asked for the cheapest prepaid phone that she had.

'Do you have a brand in mind?' she asked, distracted. 'We have some good deals on the latest smart phones.'

'I need a dumb phone,' said Ford. 'The cheapest and dumbest that you have.' She looked at him in disgust for a second, then reached under the counter and pulled out a red phone the same as Kavanagh's. 'Perfect,' said Ford.

The girl asked to see Ford's driver's licence and he looked across at Kavanagh who shrugged and turned away, her attention caught by a display of cameras on the counter. Ford showed the girl his licence and gave her his credit card and as she started the paperwork Kavanagh pointed to a digital camera with a long lens. 'We'll take one of those, too,' she said. 'On his credit card.'

Ford opened the box that held the phone. 'I need to use this right away,' he said. The girl took the phone out of the box, inserted a fresh battery and the SIM card and the power chimed and the screen lit up she handed it back to him, holding it gingerly between two blue nails. Kavanagh snatched it from her hand and thumbed the keypad

and the phone in her own pocket started to ring. She cancelled the call and gave the phone to Ford. 'Right,' she said, picking up the camera and checking that its battery was charged too. 'We're set.'

Ford followed her back out into the street and off along Saint George's Terrace, passing between the pedestrians, the morning sun behind them now shining down the street between the rows of office towers that loomed over them.

She reached the junction of William Street and stopped. The lights changed, and the crowd waiting at the crossing surged across the road, jostling Kavanagh and nearly carrying her into the street. She got swung around until she was facing Ford, pushed against the post of the traffic light, where she braced herself and let the crowd part on either side of her. When Ford caught up with her she wasn't looking at him, but over his head at the grand old building that dominated the street corner. He stood next to her and looked up.

'The bank,' she said. 'I reckon McCann will be along in the next hour or two, then we'll see what he can show us.'

The bank had once been a hotel, the finest in the city, a three storey wedding cake of a building in red brick and pale pink stucco. There were balconies on the upper floors facing both streets on two levels, and the entrance was framed by muscular columns that ran up the full height of the façade, crowned by a hammered copper dome. The hotel had been bought by the bank who had planned to demolish it, but a public campaign had forced the government to save the building, and the bank had been forced to build around it, their glass tower jammed behind the hotel, dwarfing it in height but subservient in grandeur. A glass atrium wrapped itself around the hotel, a zig-zag roof of cascading glass shading humble entrances from each street through revolving doors. The hotel now served as a banking hall, the vast oak bar now staffed by tellers, the once noisy hub of the city now in hushed silence.

'I'll watch the main door,' said Kavanagh. 'You go around the corner and watch the William Street side.' She waved her phone at him. 'Stay in touch,' she shouted as the traffic lights changed again and she allowed herself to be carried across the street with the crowd. She took up a position in the shadow of the entrance portico of a nondescript brown office block opposite the bank.

Ford turned and looked up William Street for a place to stand. He crossed the street when the lights changed and found a concrete wall at the edge of a park that gave him a clear view of the bank entrance. He leaned against the wall and looked towards Kavanagh. She was just a shape now in the shadows, and he wondered whether they should have devised some system of hand signals. He pulled the phone from his pocket and found the number Kavanagh had stored in it. He typed a message: 'How long are we going to wait here?'

He saw her moving, feeling in her jacket for her phone, and saw a flicker of light in the shadows as the screen lit up, showing him her face. His phone beeped to signal her reply.

'As long as it takes,' the message read. 'I hope you have a strong bladder.'

**29.**

Kavanagh had been standing in the shadow of the office portico for four hours and her own bladder had started to strain, her feet were sore and she wished she'd worn something softer than her biker boots.

She'd watched Ford disappear twice for coffee, miming to her tipping a cup to his lips, then when she didn't respond he texted her asking if she wanted a drink. He'd used other hand signals that she hadn't understood, and she had simply waved her phone at him and shrugged. As the sun had moved around the shadow under the portico had receded and she'd had to retreat further towards the entrance to the building, close enough to the door to catch the eye of the security guard sitting behind his desk in the foyer. He was young and his hair was thinning. Too short and out of shape to ever make it as a cop, but he enjoyed wearing a uniform. He watched her for ten minutes, seemingly without blinking, so she walked over to him, showed him an old business card that listed her as a detective, and said two words to him: 'Police surveillance.' That seemed enough for him, and when she reached the door and looked back at him he smiled and gave her a nod in acknowledgement. She thought he may even have winked.

When she stepped outside again Ford was eating a sandwich. She thought about how long they had both been away from the street and she had pulled out her phone to message him when the limousine pulled up in front of the bank.

It had come from her left and she hadn't been expecting that. She'd spent the morning looking east down the Terrace towards the hotel, but the limo had gone around the city and approached on the other side of the road, so it could park right outside the bank. It sat there now with its hazard lights flashing, blocking the bus lane.



Kavanagh looked through the camera, zoomed in on the licence plate to make sure it was the car from the hotel, then she watched as the driver stepped out and walked around to the kerb. It took her a few moments to recognise the driver, dressed in a sharp black suit and tie, her hair tied up and tucked into a peaked cap, her eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses. There was enough red hair spilling from under the cap for Kavanagh to know it was Yana, the Israeli who worked for Roth.

Yana opened the back door and Roth stepped out, Kavanagh watching him with the lens on full zoom, taking his picture as he pulled himself upright, smoothed down the jacket of his black suit and exchanged words with Yana, looking up and down the street.

Then McCann appeared, looking relaxed in a three-piece pinstripe suit, every inch the corporate raider. He looked up at the bank, a smile on his face like he owned the building, and then all three of them climbed the steps and stepped between the columns that framed the entrance, and as Yana opened the door for the two men Kavanagh took their picture.

She had her phone in her hand now and as soon as Ford answered she said, 'They're here.'

'I know,' said Ford. 'I saw the limo. Not exactly inconspicuous leaving it in the bus lane.'

'Keep watching from there. I'll move up and see what's going on inside.'

She ran across the road, getting a horn from the driver of a bus who clipped her elbow with his wing mirror. She bounded up the steps and looked through the glass of the carved oak doors. McCann was at the far end of the banking hall, flanked by Roth and Yana, walking straight past the row of tellers to a glass office at the far end. She took a couple of photos of him talking to a man in a suit with a tie in the bank's corporate colours, then they left the office and walked up a broad staircase leading to the upper floors. Roth followed a few paces behind while Yana waited at the bottom of

the stairs, hands clasped behind her back, feet planted apart, her eyes still hidden behind the glasses. Her head was still, but Kavanagh knew her eyes were moving behind the glasses, ever vigilant.

Kavanagh thought about stepping into the hall, but she would have been in full view of Yana and every security camera. She pulled back into the shadows of the main entrance and waited. Her phone beeped and she looked at the message from Ford.

‘What happens upstairs?’ it said.

‘Dunno,’ she replied. ‘Might connect to the office tower behind.’

Customers came past her, stepping through the doors, and when the bank security guard walked close to the door on his round she pretended to be looking at her phone,

When she next looked through the glass McCann was walking down the stairs carrying a black sports bag, huge and square at the corners, banging against his knee as he came down the stairs. The bank manager had a similar bag. Kavanagh took their photo as they reached the base of the stairs and dropped the bags in front of Yana. If they were heavy, it didn’t seem to bother her. She took a bag in each hand and started walking towards the door.

Kavanagh didn’t have time to text Ford. She hoped he could see from wherever he was standing. She skipped down the steps, edged backwards along the front wall of the façade, then stepped around the corner, into the recess where the old building met the glass entrance to the office block behind.

She looked around the corner just as Yana and McCann came onto the pavement. She took a couple of photos as Yana opened the back door of the limo and held the door open for McCann to step inside.

Yana stayed holding the door open, then turned her head towards Kavanagh and took off her glasses. She stared straight at Kavanagh, who lowered the camera and

stared straight back at her, holding her gaze a full ten seconds before realising the danger she was in.

She felt the muzzle of the gun in the small of her back before she heard Roth's voice close behind her. 'I guess surveillance was not something you trained for,' he said, his voice barely above a whisper, but his mouth so close to her ear she could feel his breath on her skin and could smell his cologne. His left hand came around and took the camera out of her hand,

She cursed herself for not thinking where he was. He had come out of the revolving door of the office tower, walked calmly up behind her while she was watching the money, and now he had a gun in her back.

'Let's walk slowly up to the car and get into it,' said Roth.

Kavanagh walked forward and Roth stayed a pace behind. She didn't dare look over her shoulder at him, but as she got to the car she could see his reflection in the window, right behind her, the gun hidden.

She nodded to Yana as she stepped through the limo door. There were two pairs of seats facing each other. McCann was sitting at the back, the bags beside him, and he gave Kavanagh a smug smile as she took the seat opposite him, her back to the glass screen that separated them from the driver. Roth took the seat next to her, his hands resting in his lap, wrists crossed. She saw he was wearing gloves, tight fitting leather driver's gloves. In his left hand he had the camera, and in his right hand a small nickel-plated revolver, pointed at her kidneys.

Yana closed the door and then walked around to the driver's door.

As the limo moved off silently, Kavanagh looked over McCann's shoulder, out of the rear window, and saw Ford appear around the corner of the bank, running along the pavement, trying to catch up with the car.

**30.**

Kavanagh watched Ford run for half a block before he collided with a woman and her child and fell out of view. When she looked back at McCann he was still smiling at her, one hand resting on top of the bags of money.

‘How long have you been chasing me?’ he asked calmly.

Kavanagh looked at the door handle, tried to remember if she’d heard the locks engage, tried to calculate if she could roll out of the door before Roth fired his gun. ‘Three years,’ she said to McCann. ‘From the Gwardar robbery to Perth, and then to Marble Bar and back.’

‘And you’re still no closer to getting anything on me.’

‘I’m within touching distance,’ said Kavanagh. She leaned forward in her seat and stretched out a hand towards McCann, but Roth laid the gun across her wrist and pushed down her arm. She pulled her hand back, but she could see the gun clearly now. It was the little Smith and Wesson Airweight that she had taken off Chadwick, and Singh had then taken off her at the hotel.

‘So why are you still in pursuit?’ asked McCann. He seemed genuinely curious, as if he didn’t know.

‘Alannah Doyle,’ said Kavanagh, ‘and Diane Ford.’

‘That was Zhou,’ said McCann, quietly. ‘That was outside my control.’

‘It’s all outside your control, isn’t it? You’re selling out to Robert Lau. He’ll have control of everything.’

McCann’s smile widened. ‘And who did you sell out to? I saw you flirting with the twins at the casino. Sofia staking Ford at the poker table in one of her little games. You are their puppets. The twins are using you to get to me, and through me at their brother.’

‘We’re all puppets,’ said Kavanagh. ‘It’s just that some of us can see the strings.’

They had travelled the length of the Terrace now. Kavanagh turned her head and saw the hotel down the street. The limo slowed to make the turn down the hill, then braked before turning into the ramp down to the car park. It paused while the barrier lifted, and then they were down the ramp and into the dark undercroft, the inside of the limo falling into shadow and gloom.

The limo didn’t head towards the roped area next to the Bentley, but turned the other direction, to a deserted and dark area of basement empty of cars except for a single silver Audi alone on a broad expanse of concrete.

McCann looked out of the window as the limo pulled up beside the Audi and stopped. He turned to look at Roth, confusion on his face.

Roth raised the gun and pointed it at McCann’s chest, and the look in McCann’s eyes changed, a second of surprise and then something else, approaching resignation.

Roth fired twice, the muzzle flash bouncing off the rear window, lighting up the inside of the limousine like a camera and reflecting off McCann’s wide eyes. The shots left a loud ringing inside the closeness of the limousine. McCann looked down at the blood blooming on his white shirt front among the black powder burns, then looked at Roth in bewilderment. Roth fired one more time, putting a neat hole in McCann’s forehead and a spray of blood across the back window.

Roth slowly put the gun in his pocket and turned to face Kavanagh. She understood at once. ‘My prints are still on that gun,’ she said.

‘And they are on the camera too,’ said Roth. ‘Proof that you followed him to the bank with the intention of robbing him.’

The partition slid down and Roth leaned his head back to speak to Yana. ‘Make the call,’ he said. The partition started to slide back up and Kavanagh heard the keypad tones of Yana’s phone.

'You have a few minutes before the police arrive,' said Roth. 'I'm giving you a head start.'

'Singh gave you the gun,' said Kavanagh, 'You're working for the twins now?'

'I wouldn't say that. I work for some vested interests who don't want to see McCann's iron ore assets in Chinese hands.'

'The government?' asked Kavanagh.

Roth laughed at this, a deep roar and Kavanagh thought it was the first time she had heard him laugh.

'The government couldn't afford me,' he said. 'And they haven't ever been able to stop Australian resources falling into foreign ownership.'

'The multinationals then.'

'You're working it out,' said Roth. 'It's just a pity for you that you didn't do it sooner.'

'And the twins, they want the same thing. Robert weakened. You're helping them, too.'

'If you can't ride two horses, don't join the circus.'

'So now McCann's mining leases expire, and your employers put pressure on the government to give the leases to a friendly company that already has the necessary infrastructure. But why did Zhou kill Alannah and Diane Ford?'

'You can take some of the blame for that,' said Roth. 'When you arrested Diane in Marble Bar, you spooked Patti Cheung. She panicked. She sees your friend writing stories about McCann's deal with Robert, and she figures there's a security leak at the casino. Zhou agreed with her after those hackers released all that information about him. Doyle's story was similar to what Diane told the police, Chadwick saw her interview records, told McCann, who then told Robert. Zhou got his computer guys to go through the casino computer system and they found that Diane's laptop had been the

route that the hackers had used into the network. That led them to Doyle. Zhou and Patti wanted the hacker, and Diane Ford, Alannah Doyle and you were the way to him.'

'And now you're using me to get back at her?'

'No, you were just an opportunity that presented itself.'

Yana opened the door next to Kavanagh and took out the bags, not even looking at McCann slumped in the seat. She took them around the limo to the Audi and loaded them into the boot.

A choice was coming, and she wanted to choose well.

'This opportunity, it was to rob McCann?'

'No,' said Roth. 'The cash is just a sweetener. Less than my employers are paying me.'

'I don't trust information that comes too easily. Why are you telling me this?'

Roth gave her a small smile. 'I didn't want you thinking that this is over. You've still got some work to do.'

'McCann's estate will pass to his daughter. Robert will still get his hands on it all when he marries her.'

'The race isn't over yet. We're only entering the final straight.'

Kavanagh looked at him, his quiet control of the situation. 'Am I becoming more like you?' she said.

'You say that like it's a bad thing.'

'I don't like you.'

'I don't recall asking you to,' said Roth. 'Not everyone goes through life yearning to be liked. You've still got a way to go. You've still got that fear inside you that you think is conscience. You think you are driven by ethics, but you have no real empathy for people.'

‘Someone told me recently that I was the embodiment of the goddess of mercy and compassion.’

‘Not someone that knows you very well.’

‘I’m not afraid of anyone.’

‘No, you’re afraid of yourself. What might happen if you let go. I’m setting you free, in more than the most obvious way. You can be so much more, and I’m giving you that opportunity. I feel like one of those naturalists releasing an endangered species back into the wild.’

Kavanagh narrowed her eyes at him. ‘What makes you think the animal won’t stalk you?’

‘I have no doubt that one day you’ll come looking for me, but you’ll be looking for a job. If you get through this.’

Yana opened the limo door on Roth’s side. ‘We need to go,’ she said.

Kavanagh looked up at her. She’d taken off the cap and her red hair had fallen loose. ‘Is this how he roped you?’ she asked.

‘Something similar,’ said Yana. ‘He knows most of the things that can be done to desperate people.’

‘You enjoy this work?’

‘The money is better in the private sector. The burden of proof is lighter, and in most cases it’s easier to ensure justice is done.’ And then she was gone, over to the driver’s door of the Audi, and soon the engine burst into life, echoing off the concrete walls.

‘They say that everyone is born a hero, but if you let it, life will push you over the line until you’re the villain. Trouble is you don’t always know that you’ve crossed that line,’ said Roth.

‘Your past has been burned and your future is empty. Time for you to leave.’



Kavanagh could hear police sirens in the distance now. Roth was out of the limo and walking to the Audi.

Kavanagh looked one last time at McCann, his eyes still open, the same look in them that he had seen in Diane's eyes, a look that spoke of the fragility of life and the futility of death, and then Kavanagh was out of the limo and sprinting towards the exit ramp.

**31.**

Kavanagh was ten metres behind the Audi as it sped up the exit ramp, and when it went through the barrier she sprinted through before the boom gate came down. The car turned left down the hill and she followed it. It turned again at the bottom of the slope, the tyres squealing and then the engine roaring as it accelerated away. By the time she reached the corner the Audi was already at the next junction, heading east towards the causeway and from there she reckoned they would head for the airport or just up into the hills.

The sirens were loud now, and when Kavanagh looked back up the hill two patrol cars were pulling up under the portico at the hotel entrance, lights flashing. She thought about who Yana might have called, whether she had called Chadwick or just triple zero. She turned away and walked calmly out of sight of the hotel, breathing hard from the run. She retraced her journey from that morning, along the foreshore until she reached the Concert Hall, then she found a sunny spot out of the breeze and sat down on the steps.

The sun was still high in the sky, but the sea breeze was already blowing strongly, rippling the flags along Riverside Drive and whipping whitecaps on the broad expanse of the Swan River in front of her. A flock of pink and grey galahs was picking at the fruit of a palm tree at the river's edge, their squawking reaching her even above the din of afternoon traffic.

She found her phone. It showed three missed calls from Ford and a single text message consisting only of a question mark. She rang him and he answered immediately.

'Are you alright?' he said.

'I'm fine,' said Kavanagh. 'McCann is dead. Roth is gone with the money. This time I'm the patsy. Where are you?'

There was a pause while he took all of that in and then he said, 'I'm outside the hotel. The police have sealed it off. There's two patrol cars outside and a van has just pulled up. Are you stuck inside?'

'No, I'm down at the Concert Hall.'

'What are you doing there?'

'I'm just sitting on the steps, enjoying the sunshine. Why don't you join me? Bring some ice cream.'

'I'll be there in five,' said Ford, and then he was gone.

She found the only other number in the phone and rang Iron Crutch. He picked up on the third ring.

'I can see what's happening at the hotel,' he said. 'Do you need help getting out?'

No, I'm already out,' said Kavanagh. 'I need help getting back in.'

'There are police all over the hotel.'

'Can you see the basement car park?'

'No, that went dark an hour ago. Not hacked, someone smashed the cameras, some woman dressed as a chauffeur. Tasty looking.'

Kavanagh sighed and then said, 'Can you see the penthouse suites?'

'The family is all up there, but their security is down in the foyer, trying to stop the cops getting past the front desk.'

'We need to meet,' said Kavanagh. 'Where are you?'

'I'm still in the city. I needed to be close enough to the hotel to use their wireless network for a few little hacks. Where do you want to meet?'

Kavanagh looked along Riverside Drive and saw the Bell Tower, the green glass spire rising above the flagpoles and the palm trees.

‘Meet me at the Bell Tower,’ she said. ‘Right at the front between the fountains. How soon can you get there?’

‘Twenty minutes. I’m in the wheelchair.’

‘It’s downhill most of the way,’ said Kavanagh and killed the call.

She checked her watch and when she looked up there was Ford walking across the forecourt of the Concert Hall. He had an ice cream cone in each hand, one white and one pink, and when he saw her watching him he took a long lick from the vanilla cone and winked at her.

He sat down on the steps next to her and passed her the pink cone.

‘I didn’t actually mean for you to bring ice cream,’ said Kavanagh.

‘I know,’ said Ford. He handed her the pink cone. ‘I always figured you for a strawberry girl.’

‘And you, you’re so vanilla.’ She took a lick at the ice cream and for a moment she allowed herself to forget that she was on the run, and to think maybe she could just enjoy an ice cream on a sunny day by the river. She glanced at Ford, looking goofy now licking his ice cream, a thin line of white running above his upper lip, and she wondered if they could ever have fun together, just hang out like lovers and friends, doing something dull and predictable and not worry about it. She liked that he hadn’t asked her what had happened in the limo, that he seemed in no hurry, and that maybe he was enjoying this moment too, not thinking about what they had to do next.

When she’d licked her way down to the cone she stood up and checked her watch.

‘We’re meeting the hacker in ten minutes,’ she said. She pointed across to the Bell Tower.

‘You’ve got our next move planned?’ asked Ford.

She liked that he trusted her, how they were working together.

‘I’ll know better when I find out if that cripple shows up.’

They walked down the steps together and Kavanagh dropped the remnants of her cone in a litter bin. Ford continued to eat his as they walked into the Supreme Court Gardens towards the river, crunching on the cone.

They turned towards the Bell Tower, the wind in their faces now, the spire ahead of them among the trees. As they crossed the road they saw that Iron Crutch was already there in the shadow cast by the spire, sheltering between the great curved sheets of copper that wrapped around the spire and looked like the sails of some ship catching the sea breeze. The wind was catching the smoke from the cigarette in his hand, blowing it across the flat pool of water around the fountains.

As they got closer he started looking around, nervous. Kavanagh walked up to him and stood right in front of him, looking down at him in the chair.

‘You still jumpy?’ she said.

‘It helps to keep up a caution level at paranoia, especially when everyone really is out to get you.’

‘Are you still carrying around that Nazi relic?’

Iron Crutch lifted the blanket over his knees and showed her the Walther lying in his lap. She leaned closer to the chair as if to look, then reached down and grabbed one of the footrests and pulled up on it, tipping the chair backwards. Iron Crutch fought for his balance, his arms flailing and then he was grabbing at the rims of the wheels, and at that moment Kavanagh snatched the gun from his lap and let go of the chair, letting the front wheels drop back to the ground.

She slid the gun inside her jacket before Iron Crutch had even opened his mouth to complain.

‘I need this more than you,’ she said. ‘I ought to shoot you with the damn thing for what you’ve done.’

'I thought you wanted my help?' said Iron Crutch, looking around for where he had dropped his cigarette.

'I do,' said Kavanagh. 'That's the reason I'm not leaving you dead in that chair. It's all because of you. All this. You need to shoulder the responsibility.'

Iron Crutch looked at Ford but got no help, so he shrugged.

'There's a deep paranoia hovering over everything in this city like a barometric disturbance before a storm. It's fucking with your head.'

'You got to Zhou through Diane Ford's laptop in Macau. Zhou was looking for you all the time. Looking for the Cult of the Grass Mud Horse. He killed Diane and he killed Alannah.'

The hacker was laughing now, his chest puffing out and then the laugh became a cough, a small trail of cigarette smoke leaking out of his mouth. Kavanagh took a step towards him and raised a hand but he rolled his chair backwards out of her reach and raised both palms in surrender.

The hacker smiled. 'Is he looking for me, or Iron Crutch?'

Kavanagh dropped her hand. 'You're not him?'

'I am Iron Crutch, and I'm not. The Eight Immortals are not individuals. We are legion, but we adopt the names of the Eight, and each of the Eight is a cell of activists, a node for operations. An infinite machine, operating a tight recursive loop. Zhou can't find me, because I'm not an individual. You call me Iron Crutch, but that's no different from calling a priest Father.'

'But Zhou nearly found you, in that caravan.'

'And if I had fallen two more would have taken my place. Zhou's problem is that there are no individuals to chase. There is no head to cut off.'

'But you were in contact with Alannah.'

'I was, but I wasn't the first person from the Iron Crutch collective that made contact with her. The first one that replied to her message on the dark web lives in Slab City, Colorado.'

'But you met her face to face.'

'You can't interview a collective. She asked to meet someone from the Cult. The media can't, or won't, write a story that doesn't convert an individual into a celebrity or a leader. Someone complete with moral failings or individual heroism. Doyle needed a spokesman, and I became that for her.'

'Why you?'

'I was closest, and the chair and the crutches fit the profile. She never questioned that Iron Crutch might be a group. You didn't either.'

Kavanagh reached inside her pocket and took out the cheque from Robert, and handed it to the hacker. He looked at the number of zeroes and whistled slowly. 'Can I cash it?' he asked.

'It has an account number on it,' said Kavanagh. 'On a Perth bank. McCann cashed a cheque drawn on that same account this morning; then Roth shot him and robbed him.'

'Then if I were you I wouldn't try to cash this either.'

'Do you have enough to hack the bank now?'

'I'll get the Cult working on it. We'll launch our little Trojan horse on the bank.' His eyes lit up, glinting behind the frameless glasses.

'So that's the horse, is it?' asked Kavanagh.

'It's an adaptation of an Israeli Trojan that was caught by the Chinese government and reverse engineered, and then hacked by the Tibetans.'

'They have hackers in Tibet?'

‘Sure,’ said Iron Crutch, as if it was obvious. ‘They’re the best. The three groups that attract the most attention from the Chinese Public Security Bureau are the democracy movement, the Tibetan nationalists, and Falun Gong, and the Tibetans have the best hackers. It’s those monks. They have some spooky level of concentration. Once they’ve been contemplating the void for years they see patterns in the code that we can’t. Serious mystic shit.’

‘And they created this horse for you?’

‘It’s a work of quiet and diabolical genius. And we’re going to let it loose on the Lau family.’

‘What can you get?’ asked Kavanagh, alert and excited now. ‘Will any of it stick?’

‘You’re still talking like a cop, and a Western one. We don’t need evidence, we just need dirt, and then we spread it across the net. The Chinese government will see it, and if they think the Lau family are enough of an embarrassment they will be removed.’

‘How?’

‘They will be invited to drink tea with the department. That’s how it works. The empty chair.’

‘It’s not enough to hand Robert over to the Chinese authorities,’ said Kavanagh, her eyes cold.

‘And this Trojan, this is your Grass Mud Horse?’ Ford was speaking now. He’d been hovering behind Kavanagh’s shoulder, listening but not talking. Now he cut across them and Iron Crutch looked at him for a moment from the chair and then started laughing again.

‘So what is this Grass Mud Horse?’ asked Ford.

‘You said it was mythical,’ as he looked first at Kavanagh and then at Ford. His chest stopped convulsing and then he spoke.



‘The Eight Immortals are an ancient myth. The Grass Mud Horse is a very modern one.’ He sat back in the chair, enjoying telling the story. ‘When the Chinese authorities started clamping down on the net, they censored all kinds of shit. They would search for certain words, anything to find dissent on the web. But Mandarin is a slippery language. You English speakers think you invented the pun, even though you stole the *double entendre* from the French. But Mandarin is even more flexible. With the four tones there is a wealth of homophones that let you make puns, to say one thing and mean another. And written Chinese is not phonetic, so we could avoid the censors and take the piss at the same time. Net users on the mainland invented a series of mythical creatures. The first to appear were the river crabs, *héxié*. It’s a pun on the Mandarin word for harmony, *héxié*. That’s what the government censors hope to do, to create a harmonious society by removing any dissent. So the net created an adversary for these river crabs, which was the Cao Ni Mao, the Grass Mud Horse. It was supposed to be some sort of alpaca, but it’s another pun. It sounds like the Mandarin phrase *cào ni mā*. It means ‘go fuck your mother’. So when bloggers on the mainland speak of the Grass Mud Horse, or post pictures of it, they are telling the government to fuck off.’

‘And this Cult of yours?’ asked Kavanagh.

‘We are the ultimate fuck-you.’

Ford was still listening, taking this in. He thought for a while before he said, ‘This joke only works in Mandarin. Does it work in Macau? The Lau family speak Cantonese.’

‘They speak Mandarin too,’ said Iron Crutch. ‘The government makes every Chinese citizen learn it now. They say: speak like a proper person, speak Mandarin!’

‘But how do you say it in Cantonese?’

Iron Crutch looked at him and said the words. Ford repeated them and Iron Crutch corrected him. After the fourth time Iron Crutch nodded slowly. 'Not bad for a round-eye,' he said. 'You might even master the four tones in time.'

Kavanagh was getting more anxious, bored by the language lesson, her hand on the gun inside her jacket. 'We need you back at your computer, launching your little hacker army on these people.'

'And what are you going to do?'

Now Kavanagh was smiling. 'Keyboard warriors eventually need real warriors with guns. We need you to get us back into the hotel.'

She turned and walked away and Ford let her get past the fountains before he followed her. As he caught up with her he heard a voice from the wheelchair say, 'Give a man a gun and he can rob a bank. Give a man a bank and he can rob the world.'

### 32.

They turned the corner at the bottom of the hill and saw the police vehicles crowded outside the hotel entrance, lights still spinning, and Kavanagh's phone chimed. She stopped in the shade of a tree and looked at the screen.

'Iron Crutch,' she said. 'The security cameras went dark after the police arrived. The Laus are all still in their rooms. We can get in via the service door by the kitchens and then up in the lift.' With that she was across the road, passing downhill of the hotel and cutting up the laneway on the far side, deep in shadow between the hotel and the apartment tower beside it.

They found the service door hidden behind a dumpster. Kavanagh swiped the lock and held the door open for Ford without looking at him or speaking. They found themselves in a plain white-tiled corridor, that ran along the length of the building. Kavanagh turned toward the lifts and Ford followed, putting his face to the wired glass window at the centre of each door that they passed. Ford saw the kitchen and the laundry, both still busy working.

At the private lift that served the penthouse floors Kavanagh stopped and put the swipe card to the panel and again Ford felt himself holding his breath, waiting for the door to open. When they did he heard Kavanagh exhale, the sound amplified by the tiled walls. When they stepped into the lift Ford saw that they were on Floor B1, a floor below the foyer and one above the car park. Kavanagh pushed the button marked P4 and the lift shot upwards, both of them looking at the lights above the door as the numbers counted upwards. Kavanagh had her hand inside her jacket, and Ford wondered what he would do without a weapon when the doors opened.

The lift chimed and as the door slid back Singh was standing in the corridor facing them, a Gurkha beside him, and not the slightest bit of surprise on his face at seeing

Ford and Kavanagh. He bowed slightly towards them, the smallest of smiles creasing his mouth.

Kavanagh stepped out of the lift and squared up to him. Ford put himself at her shoulder, facing the Gurkha, and waited to see what would happen next. Beyond Singh he could see the door to Robert Lau's suite.

'Are you guarding Robert now?'

'After a fashion,' said Singh. 'I'm ensuring he doesn't leave.'

'There are police in the foyer,' said Kavanagh. 'He's not going anywhere.'

'You forget that he has police connections,' said Singh. 'If he wants to leave, he can simply go down to the Bentley and drive out.'

'Does Robert know the police are here?'

Singh nodded.

'They're looking for me,' said Kavanagh. 'I was set up by Roth.'

'Who's in the suite with him?' said Ford.

'His fiancé,' said Singh.

'Does she know her father is dead?'

'I believe that's why the police are here.'

'No, they're looking for me,' said Kavanagh.

Singh nodded wisely.

Kavanagh was frowning, 'Does he have security in there?'

'His man Fung.'

'The poser with the tooth pick?' asked Kavanagh and Singh nodded.

'Just one bodyguard?' she asked.

'The rest of his security are in the foyer, trying to stall the police.'

'So what are you doing here?'

‘The police will eventually get to the penthouses,’ said Singh. ‘When they search Robert’s mother’s suite, they will find the bodies of Zhou and Bao in a guest bedroom. They will also find your friend Miss Doyle. After that they will want to talk to Robert, and I doubt if even his friend Chadwick can make that go away.’

Kavanagh twitched, her hand moving inside her jacket. The Gurkha took a step forward but Singh raised a hand and stopped him. He stared at Kavanagh, never looking at her hand, just keeping eye contact until Kavanagh spoke.

‘You said you would take care of her body. I expected you to show a little respect.’

‘An opportunity presented itself,’ said Singh. He was about to speak again when he stopped and put a hand to his ear, hidden under the turban, as if listening. ‘The police are in Miss Chong’s suite now,’ he said. ‘I believe they have detained her.’

Ford leaned forward so he could see the behind Singh, and saw the wire leading from under his turban and down his neck, only a short length visible before it disappeared into the high collar of his tunic. He wondered if Singh had always been wearing the earpiece, and why he hadn’t noticed it before. ‘So you were expecting us?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Singh. ‘I was expecting the police, but it was a pleasure to see you instead. Either way, it works well for us.’

‘For the twins?’

Singh bowed slightly and stepped aside. A flick of his hand made the Gurkha move to the opposite side of the corridor.

Ford looked at Kavanagh and she nodded and started walking towards the door to Robert Lau’s suite, her hand still inside her jacket. As she passed Singh he said quietly: ‘When you are finished, I would be happy to chauffeur you anywhere you care to go in the Bentley. The trunk is quite comfortable.’

Kavanagh passed through the arch of the metal detector and it beeped insistently and the light at its apex blinked red. Kavanagh looked around at Singh and the big man shrugged and turned away towards the lift.

Ford joined Kavanagh at the door, and there they paused, standing side by side and staring at the heavy door. Kavanagh had the pistol in her hand now, her arm hanging loose by her side, the gun resting casually against the back of her thigh.

Ford sighed. 'I feel like you're on my side, but only just.'

She looked at him sideways, then turned her attention back to the door.

Ford stared back at her. She was somewhere distant now, out of his reach, back inside her cop shell. There were things they should have told each other, back in the bed, between the clean white sheets, before things became so dirty. There were things he could have told her, and things that he had been wanting her to tell him, things he would have liked to hear her say, and now he knew he never would.

'We need to finish the work we came for,' she said, without looking at him.

'It seems so cold,' said Ford. 'The anger is gone. All that's left is emptiness.'

'You have your daughter,' said Kavanagh. 'I have nothing.'

'You have me.'

'Maybe if we had met at some other time,' she said. 'But it's hopeless now. I have to do this and then leave. Take all the heat away from you.'

With that she put the swipe card up to the panel by the door and Ford heard the soft click as the door unlocked.

Kavanagh pushed the door open and they stood together looking across the wide room and out of the wide plate glass windows to the river beyond. It was the same layout as the twins' suite, but the stark white minimalism had been replaced with plush opulence. The windows were framed with heavy red drapes, the floors covered with red and gold silk carpets. Two red couches faced each other in the centre of the room, Ford

and Kavanagh looking down the gap between them. Robert Lau sat on one couch, dressed in a business shirt and tie, his sleeves rolled up, and opposite him was Ellen McCann. Robert was looking at them, but Ellen was staring into the distance, out of the window at the city beyond. She was dressed in white, a loose linen dress with sleeves that reached down to her wrists and a loose skirt that flowed around her legs. Her bare feet were pulled up onto the edge of the couch and was leaning forward, hugging her knees, rocking slowly backwards and forwards, nodding her head to a beat only she could hear. Then she put her face down onto her arms and went still.

Robert made to stand but Kavanagh showed him the gun and waved him back down onto the couch. There was the click of a door opening behind them on their right and both Ford and Kavanagh turned as Fung stepped out from a side room.

He saw the Walther in Kavanagh's hand and started to reach inside his jacket. He only had his gun halfway out of his shoulder holster when Kavanagh raised her arm and fired twice, both shots hitting him in the chest. Fung crumpled sideways and fell onto a red lacquered table and by the time the sound of the shots had died away he had stopped moving.

Robert Lau was on his feet again and Kavanagh turned quickly to level the gun at him.

'On your knees' she said. 'Put your hands behind your head and lace your fingers.'

Robert sank slowly onto his knees and raised his hands, his eyes still on the gun.

'What's up with her?' asked Kavanagh, nodding towards Ellen.

'She heard about her father,' said Robert, 'and the next thing she was shooting up.'

Kavanagh stepped between the couches and grabbed Ellen's wrist pulling it up and away from her knees. Her sleeve fell down to reveal the fresh needle marks in her forearm. 'How long's she been using again?' said Kavanagh.

'Does it matter?' said Robert.

Kavanagh grabbed Ellen by the hair and tipped her head back to look into her faraway eyes, the pupils like pin pricks.

‘She doesn’t even know we’re here,’ said Kavanagh, then turned to Ford. ‘Get her out of here. Go shut her in one of the bedrooms.’ She still had hold of Ellen’s wrist and now she pulled her up off the couch, trying to get her to stand. Ford stepped up just as Ellen’s knees started to buckle under her and he caught her as she fell. He scooped her up in his arms, her body so thin she seemed weightless, her skinny arms and legs dangling loose like a broken ragdoll. Her eyes were closed now and Ford could hear her humming to herself as he carried her through the door that Fung had left open and laid her on the bed. He closed the door as he left, not bothering to see if he could lock it.

Kavanagh had found a length of braided red rope that had been holding back the heavy red drapes from the window. She stuck the gun in the waistband of her jeans and tied Robert’s hands behind his back. He seemed calm, passive, accepting of his fate.

‘How is Ellen?’

‘Sleeping,’ said Ford. ‘She can grieve in peace.’

‘She is not in mourning,’ said Robert. ‘She is free at last of her father.’

Kavanagh wrapped the rope around Robert’s torso, binding his wrists into the small of his back.

‘I’ll bet you wish you could get free of your father,’ she said. ‘And free of your brother and sister.’

‘Are you doing this for the twins?’

Kavanagh put a loop in the rope and threw it over Robert’s head, cinching it tight around his neck. She heard him choke and then pulled his head backwards, leaning over to put her mouth close to his ear.

‘How does that feel?’ she hissed.



Robert tried to speak but could only manage a dry croak. Kavanagh watched his face turn red before she released the tension on the rope.

Robert gasped and drew breath before speaking. 'Fate has been disloyal to me,' he said, his voice a thin rasp.

'She's a bitch like that,' said Kavanagh. 'Fate is a slut. One minute she's loving you, then she's moved on to the next guy.'

She pulled the rope tight and watched the pain in Robert's eyes. 'This is not for the twins,' she said. 'This is for Alannah Doyle and Diane Ford.'

She pulled the pistol from her jeans and offered it butt first to Ford. He looked at it for a long time, as if not recognising its form, then he stepped forward and took it from her, hefting it in his hand still staring at it as if trying to determine its purpose. Then there was a moment when his eyes changed and went dead, and his humanity vanished.

Robert started to whimper, a slow gurgling whine. He tried to speak, and so Kavanagh released the rope at his throat.

'It's not me you hate,' he said. 'I didn't kill them. It was her idea. My mother.'

'*Diu lei lo mo,*' said Ford quietly, and pulled the trigger.

**END**

# **EXEGESIS: The dissenter and anti-authoritarian aspects of Australian history and character that inform the moral ambiguity that marks Australian crime fiction**

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

*'In Australia there seems to be no inside life of any sort, just a long lapse and drift. A rather fascinating indifference, a physical indifference to what we call soul or spirit. It's really a weird show. The country has an extraordinary hoary, weird attraction.'*  
(Lawrence, 549)

Crime fiction has a long tradition in Australian culture, a product of the nation's Western origins as a penal colony. Australia's convict heritage, and its wave of working-class migrants during the Gold Rush, led to a purported national character suspicious of authority. This lent its crime fiction a distinct voice, such that the forces of law and order were commonly seen as agents of repression, in a nation without a Bill of Rights or any constitutional protection of civil liberties. This resulted in early colonial Australian crime fiction differing significantly from other crime fiction in the Anglosphere, in that the moral sensibilities of Australian crime fiction were inverted. This exegesis seeks to identify how the dissenter and anti-authoritarian aspects of Australian history and character informed a unique inverted morality which predated the ambiguity usually associated with mid-twentieth century American and European *noir* fiction.

Much early Australian crime fiction differs significantly from other crime fiction produced overseas at that time. Whereas British and American crime fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century sought to clearly delineate between right and wrong, and to portray a 'reassuring world in which those that try to disturb the established order were always discovered and punished' (Symons, 11), Australian colonial crime fiction started from the premise that the convict was already a punished sinner. The Pilgrim Fathers setting out for America 'saw themselves as the redeemed, whereas the first European Australians saw themselves as the damned.' (Keneally, 1993, 52)

If, as Symons says, the 'psychological reason for the weakening of the detective story in recent years is a weakening of the sense of sin' (Symons, 10), then the result is that British and American crime fiction has moved closer to the moral ambiguity already well-established in the Australian canon. Whereas this moral ambiguity in American and European crime fiction is seen as post-modern, in Australian fiction it might be seen to pre-figure modernism and post-modernism, and be a product of the unique conditions in which the punished struggled to prevail.

Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton* (1831) is generally considered to be the first Australian novel, and its picaresque story of a convict transported to New South Wales established a pattern in early convict fiction of penitence, reformation and redemption, often leading to a return to a redemptive England.

This pattern changed when transportation to New South Wales and Queensland ended in 1840. The gold rush started in 1850, and in the following decade Australia's population tripled, and the nature of Australian society, and of its crime fiction, changed. The majority of the convict novels, such as Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, were written after transportation had ceased, suggesting that they sought to re-analyse the convict period and its effect on a changing Australian society.

Redemption was replaced by individual fortitude against adversity, often personified by the corrupt forces of law and order.

A similar observation can be made about the bushranger stories written in the same period. In Boldrewood's *Robbery under Arms* or Hornung's *Stingaree*, both written after transportation had ceased, the bushranger is turned into a mythic hero. There is a paucity of research with regard to crime fiction in Australia, but a survey conducted by Stephen Knight shows that the crime novel without a detective is more prevalent in Australia than in the US or Europe. Knight suggests this is a sign of 'some deep strain of anti-authoritarianism in the Australian response to crime fiction' (Knight, 111). The portrayal of the criminal as hero, and the police and the law as agents of oppression, became a theme that runs through the work of important contemporary Australian crime writers such as Kenneth Clarke, Devon Minchin, Lance Peters, Robert G. Barrett, Gary Disher and Chris Womersley.

In this exegesis I examine the morally ambiguous Australian crime fiction published in the period from the Gold Rush of 1848 through to Federation in 1900. It was a period of great social change as the population increased and Australia transitioned from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, based on the mining of gold and coal and their attendant industries. Australia became one of the most urbanized populations in the world, as it is today.

The most popular response to the emergence of this anti-authoritarian character, proposed by Russel Ward, is that it is a development of the independent spirit of the outback frontier. The working-class attitudes of the convicts and the plebeian self-consciousness of the native-born and the rebellious spirit of the Irish immigrants, all went 'up the country' and coalesced in the ideal of the bushman, ideas which in turn returned to the cities and became the 'principal ingredient' in an Australian nationalism (Ward, 13)

Historian John Hirst argues that this anti-authoritarian strand is more a result of the massive working-class migration to Australia that commenced during the gold rush of 1850, a period that coincided with the Spring of Nations in Europe and the growth of Chartism in Britain 'It was the city larrikins, whom (Ward) does not mention, who made anti-authoritarianism an art form and who set a style which has become nationally admired.' (Hirst, 128).

In order to establish the context for both the anti-authoritarianism and associated moral ambiguity in the crime fiction of the period, a consideration of the historical events and movements of the period is required. Australian crime fiction became more prolific and vibrant in the period from 1850 to 1900, which coincided with the rapid population growth and rise in the standard of living following the Gold Rush. In that time, gold and mining outstripped wool and wheat as Australia's primary earner of foreign capital, and Australia's standard of living overtook that of Britain. This period also saw great social upheaval: the Eureka stockade, the Lambing Flat Riots, the Selection Acts, the birth of the White Australia policy, and the growth of the trade union movement.

As prosperity increased, notions of independence and self-government gained currency. In the years leading up to Federation, ideas of Australian identity were promulgated through the trade unions, through publications such as *The Bulletin* in Sydney and *The Worker* in Queensland, through popular song and through the popular literature of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. *The Bulletin* debate between these two writers, and others, helped to cement ideas of Australian national identity.

Local publishers such as George Robertson, NSW Bookstall, Clarson Massima & Co, and EW Cole were key promoters of colonial popular fiction, and crime fiction reflected the prevailing social issues of the time.

Knight has commented that the nature of Australian crime fiction changed at the end of this period, and nominates Paterson's writing of *Waltzing Matilda* in 1895 as the watershed between the early and modern period of Australian crime fiction (Knight, 1997, 120). In this exegesis I will push that watershed a little further, until Federation in 1901. Although Lawson published *Wanted by the Police* in 1910, it was likely written earlier, and certainly is imbued with the spirit of the nineties.

Australian crime fiction in the early part of the twentieth century became noticeably moribund. Following the publication of Hume's *Mystery of a Hansom Cab* in 1886, and its great popularity overseas, the character of Australian crime fiction changed. It started to emulate genres that had developed and been codified overseas, by writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie and the American pulp writers. In many instances Australian writers left the setting of their novels vague, and the establishment of crime fiction as a distinct genre reduced its potency as a tool to examine local society.

Much early twentieth-century Australian crime fiction, if it related to Australia at all, tended to reflect the insular and parochial ideas of Australia epitomized by the bush myth of the *Bulletin* debate, and was reflective of the inherent conservatism resulting from what Donald Horne calls the 'wowsers effect.' (Horne, 59)

Australian crime fiction entered a new period of vibrancy in the late fifties, a period that coincided with a counter-revolution in Australian historiography that rejected the effects of nationalism on Australian culture and the view of Australian history epitomized by *The Australian Legend*, and aimed towards the reflection of a more sophisticated and liberal society. There was a similar renaissance across all of the Australian arts, driven by the rise of the counter-culture in Europe and America, but also as a reaction to the stultifying conservatism of the Menzies Era and to the Vietnam War. There was a blossoming of new Australian painting, libertarian movements like the Sydney Push and the Melbourne Drift, Oz Magazine, and the New Wave of

Australian cinema. This new wave of crime writers started in the early sixties and extended into the seventies, and included Kenneth Cooke and Devon Minchin.

The new wave period ended in the late seventies, and might be considered to have its boundary marked by the dismissal of the Whitlam government. By the time Peter Corris published *The Dying Trade* in 1980, contemporary Australian crime fiction could be considered to have reached a maturity that has continued into the present day. (Knight, 168)

This exegesis will examine how Australian crime fiction both illustrates and informs Australian national mythology as it developed and changed from the Gold Rush to Federation.

Since no research directly examines the aspects of mood and tone in Australia's crime writing heritage, a consideration of the key features of American *noir* fiction will contribute to an analysis of Australian crime fiction. The elements of fatalism, cynicism, corruption and moral ambiguity generally associated with American *noir* fiction of the twentieth century were also present in Australian crime fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although contemporary Australian crime fiction is heavily influenced by the American and European forms of the genre, and adopts many of their stylistic elements, I will discuss how many of the cultural, economic and social pressures that helped create American *noir* fiction were present in nineteenth century Australia and continue to influence contemporary Australian crime fiction. This is not to suggest that Australian crime fiction of the nineteenth century influenced later American noir. Rather prevailing social and cultural conditions in both countries and periods produce fictions that are marked by similar uncertainties and ambiguities.

Most of Australian crime fiction of the colonial era was written before the notions of crime fiction became codified as a genre, which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century with the publication of Hume's *Mystery of a Hansom Cab* in 1886

and the popularity of Conan Doyle Sherlock Holmes stories from 1886. I will therefore be adopting a very broad definition of what constitutes crime fiction, including what Knight identifies as bushranger stories, goldfields mysteries, squatter mysteries, criminal sagas and detective stories (Knight, 1997, 13). The novels analyzed in this exegesis will share the narrative elements of crimes committed and some element of police action against those crimes.

Textual analysis of the following works will be undertaken in this exegesis:

Rolf Boldrewood	Robbery Under Arms	1883
John Lang	The Forger's Wife	1855
Charles de Boos	Mark Brown's Wife	1854
E. W. Hornung	Irralie's Bushranger	1896
Henry Lawson	Wanted by the Police	1910

As the uniqueness of Australian crime fiction was lost somewhat during the first half of the twentieth century, when it began to ape the genres established in Britain and the US, before reasserting itself in the late twentieth century, I suggest that a diachronic study of Australian crime fiction cannot satisfactorily trace its historical evolution and its reflections of social change. My approach will instead be synchronic, to explore themes developed in the later half of the nineteenth century, which inform modern crime fiction.

In his seminal paper *On The Modern Element in Modern Literature* Lionel speaks of 'the subversive tendency of modern literature'. It subverts not through this or that political action, not through its Leftism or its Fascism, but in its alienation from any kind of politics, and from men organized into rational communities. Behind much modern literature, Trilling argues, lies the German philosopher Nietzsche. And 'Nietzsche's theory of the social order dismisses all ethical impulse from its origins - the



basis of society is to be found in the rationalization of cruelty: as simple as that' (Trilling, 1961, 28)

Heseltine asks: 'What better illustration than the first half century of British occupation of Australia of Nietzsche's notion that the basis of society is the rationalization of cruelty?' (Heseltine, 40)

Nietzsche did not influence Australian writers of the late nineteenth century. *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morality* were published in 1886 and 1887 respectively. The Australian crime writing analyzed in this exegesis predates these publications, and so they are consistent with Nietzsche's theories but are not informed by them. Despite the formal and literary influences of British adventure and crime novels, the distinctive nature of Australian crime writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century was a result of the unique social and cultural post-colonial circumstances of that time. Rather than examining any influence of prevailing or developing philosophical theory or literary forms, a historicist approach may be more appropriate when discussing the prevailing literature. In this exegesis, I will focus on the effects of Australia's unique position on the narrative features of the late nineteenth century crime novel.

The moral ambivalence linking Boldrewood, Hornung, deBoos, Lang, and Lawson signifies a divorce of the social order from any ethical impulses. It explains the Australian preference for 'zero-detection', since many Australians had an implicit distrust of the instruments of law and order. Far from being amoral, early Australian crime fiction was intrinsically modern, at a time when the term was only just beginning to come into usage in western Europe.

The authors analyzed in this exegesis track the development of Australian writing up to the end of the nineties, and represent the 'inevitable stages in the passage of what was once a colonial culture to national independence and maturity' (Heseltine, 36). The

characters in Australian crime fiction inhabit a world that is structurally pathological. It is a Hobbesian state of nature, where there is no effective overarching government to ensure order and justice, or the forces of law and order are corrupt or incompetent.

Beginning from a mechanistic understanding of human beings and the passions, Hobbes postulated what life would be like without government, a condition that he called the 'state of nature'. In that state, each person would have a right, or license, to everything in the world. This, Hobbes argues, would lead to a "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) (Hobbes, 72).

'Just as at the heart of the continent is a burning, insane emptiness, so too at the heart of a man is the horror of his pre-history,' so that, confronted by 'the primal energies at the centre of his being on the stage of the Australian continent', (Heseltine, 48), and adrift in a Hobbesian and Nietzschean wilderness, the responses of Australian settlers to their environment represent an early form of existentialism. Existentialism can be defined as 'an outlook which begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that he cannot accept. It places its emphasis on man's contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates' (Porfirio, 81). Australia may be seen to be such an environment devoid of moral absolutes throughout the colonial period. Making a life in the Australian bush depended on an individual's cunning and resourcefulness, which created a more level playing field where the privileges of class were less effective. 'The common man had at last decisively proved himself... Government had proved itself a vindictive enemy, but his spiritual struggle had been won. His victory depended on the simple fact that on the frontiers of the New Countries the common man could beat the gentleman' (Phillips, 1958, 56). However, the price of this survival would seem to be 'a terrible emptiness, a restriction of human possibilities,

a cynical rejection of deeper emotion and commitment...Only a rejection of all emotional and moral ties can help a man survive in a treacherous world.' (Cawelti, 168)

Therefore the fundamental concern of the Australian literature which grew from our national origins and the harsh conditions of settlement, is to 'acknowledge the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defenses against its dangers. It is that concern which gives Australia's literary heritage its special force and distinction, which guarantees its continuing modernity.' (Heseltine, 49)

Through an examination of critical texts of Australian crime fiction from the Gold Rush of 1850 to Federation in 1901, my exegesis will seek to identify how the dissenter and anti-authoritarian aspects of Australian history and character have informed the moral ambiguity that marks Australian crime fiction of this period, and discuss how these aspects prefigure many of the elements that define twentieth-century *noir* fiction.

## Chapter 2: Towards a definition of *Noir*

Since this exegesis aims to draw parallels between nineteenth century Australian crime fiction, and twentieth century *noir*, it would be prudent to begin by defining what is meant here by *noir*.

*Noir* fiction is a literary genre of crime fiction characterized by dark themes, moral ambiguity, cynicism, disillusionment, pessimism and fatalism.

In his foreword to *The Best American Noir of the Century*, Otto Penzler remarks that '*noir* is not unlike pornography, in the sense that it is virtually impossible to define, but everyone thinks they know it when they see it.' He goes on to describe a nihilistic genre about monstrous people 'doomed to hopelessness' by their own appetites. (Penzler, ix)

*Noir* emerged during the chaotic period between the First and Second World Wars, during the upheavals caused by the Great Depression and Prohibition. It is believed to be a reaction to the moral certainty of the crime fiction that preceded it, which took place in an essentially orderly universe, with a common understanding of good and evil. 'The murder novel has also a depressing way of minding its own business, solving its own problems and answering its own questions,' said Raymond Chandler. 'There is nothing left to discuss.' Chandler thought The Golden Age of detective fiction, as the era of Sayers and Christie became known, was trite and artificial. Their characters 'became puppets and cardboard lovers and papier mâché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility. The only kind of writer who could be happy with these properties was the one who did not know what reality was.' (Chandler, 9)

*Noir* prided itself on a solid relationship with reality. It said 'to hell with all that. Its world was chaotic, baroque and hypocritical. Crime doesn't disturb this world, it's foundational to it. *Noir* stories gave the stage to criminals and their motivations, which

range from unspeakable passions to a firm conviction that their particular crime serves a greater good. A detective may pursue such a criminal, but *noir* reveals the line between them to be a product of chance and circumstance—if, indeed, such a line exists at all.’ (Seeley)

*Noir* fiction is closely bound to the cinematic genre *film noir*, and there is some debate as to whether the term *noir* was first used to describe the literary or the cinematic genre. The term is certainly French in origin and was coined in retrospect some years after the peak period for both *noir* books and movies. In literary fiction it is generally understood to be derived from the *roman noir*, meaning the black novel, or perhaps more accurately the dark novel. Originally the term was used to describe Gothic novels, but with the advent of the hard-boiled detective writers, particularly those who wrote for the pulp magazine *Black Mask*, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane and James M. Cain, the term became more associated with that genre.

Another possible source of the term is from the translations of works of American pulp writers by the French publisher Gallimard in an imprint called the *Série Noire*, so named because of its black covers. As well as works by hard-boiled writers such as Chandler and Hammett, the *Série noire* also published works by later writers such as Horace McCoy, William R. Burnett, Ed McBain, Chester Himes, Lou Cameron, Jim Thompson, and Peter Cheney. It is these later writers that came to be regarded as true *noir*.

‘The *noir* writers...were thought of in their own day as sensational pulp novelists. Though not much respected by critics of the period, many of these books were turned into sensationally successful movies. After the Second World War, these writers were taken up by French intellectuals.... After the *Série noire*’s great success in France where it was praised by literary heavyweights like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, these

writers were resurrected in America with fresh credentials and admired by intellectuals as popular existentialists writing a black literature of the absurd.’ (Cawelti, 352)

What is certain is that *noir* was a development of the hardboiled style developed by Hammett, Chandler and Cain.

Interestingly, the 1920s are also notable for the Lost Generation authors, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. George Cotkin in his *Existential America* contends that the Lost Generation writers ‘enunciated a metaphysical condition of despair and alienation,’ which ‘embraced an essentially existential perspective” (Cotkin, 24). These authors expressed the disillusionment felt by a generation who, Fitzgerald wrote in *This Side of Paradise*, had ‘grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken’ (Fitzgerald, 304). Lynn Dumenil’s examination of Fitzgerald’s work in *The Modern Temper* suggests that ‘beneath the glamour of his flappers and jazzhounds lay a fragility rooted in their failure to find meaning or purpose amid the uncertainty of modern life’ (Dumenil, 57). Hemingway’s first novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), features a lost cast of expat Americans drifting aimlessly, their instability symbolic of their homelessness and inability to find substance in the modern world.

The links between *noir* and existentialism have been made often. The writers engaged existential themes of isolation, anxiety, futility, and death in the thrilling context of the urban crime thriller. Camus was inspired to write *The Stranger* after reading James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Camus’ style is noticeably similar to Cain’s.

Chandler said of Hammett that ‘there is nothing in his work that is not implicit in the early novels and short stories of Hemingway.’ Hemingway tried his hand at a number of short crime stories, and his story *The Killers* was made into one of the finest *noir* movies in 1946, a movie that launched the careers of John Huston, Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner.

In his seminal essay *The Simple Art of Murder* Chandler wrote that ‘Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley. He wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street. And there are still quite a few people around who say that Hammett did not write detective stories at all, merely hardboiled chronicles of mean streets with a perfunctory mystery element dropped in like the olive in a martini.’

‘The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of moneymaking, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defence will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge.’

Essentially, Chandler recognizes the fact that the solution of the murder mystery is not even central to hardboiled fiction, and that ‘an effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes and the gradual elucidation of character, which is all the detective story has any right to be about anyway. The rest is spillikins in the parlor.’ (Chandler, 23)

Although Chandler freely uses the term 'hardboiled' in his essay, the term predated his use of it. Donald Westlake records the adjective applied to the tough drill sergeants of the First World War. When the war ended the returning soldiers used the term hardboiled to refer to any person that reflected a tough, unsentimental point of view (Westlake, 5). Chandler then adapted the term to describe Hammett's detectives.

'They were called hard-boiled because of their tough and sordid realism and the concise and forthright narrative style that matched the manner of the characters. The outsiders and loners in these stories were the disinherited working-class white men of the 1930s, whose protective, hard-boiled shell was a defense against a callous world.' (Faison. 6)

The Depression was an era of great unionization in America, following Roosevelt's New Deal, which allowed for collective bargaining. Hammett himself had acted as a strike-breaker and had seen the lawless methods used by employers, which often resembled gang warfare. He served as an operative for Pinkerton from 1915 to February 1922, with time off to serve in World War I. However, the agency's role in union strike-breaking eventually disillusioned him.

Three elements in thirties American society helped shape the hardboiled detective story. First was Prohibition, which forced a large number of otherwise law-abiding citizens to collaborate with organized crime under the eyes of often indulgent authorities. Then there was organized crime itself, parading as legitimate respectable business. Finally there was the capitalist system, whose similarities to organized crime were, to Hammett, not accidental. His is a world pervaded by conventional, criminal and commercial hypocrisy, and his characters cannot help but be contaminated by this world.



Marling sees the *noir* type of mystery as a reaction to the accelerated pace of economic and technological change in America and reflects the cultural trauma resulting from the sudden loss of wealth and prosperity in the Depression (Marling ix)

The genre's typical protagonist is a detective who witnesses daily the violence of organized crime that flourished during Prohibition and its aftermath, while dealing with a legal system that had become as corrupt as the organized crime itself. Rendered cynical by this cycle of violence, the detectives of hardboiled fiction are classic antiheroes.

In many hard-boiled stories the detective is given a mission. Pursuing this mission he happens on the first of a series of murders that gradually reveal to him the true nature of his quest. The investigation becomes not simply a matter of determining who the guilty party is but of defining the detective's own moral position. (Cawelti, 146)

Thus, while the classical detective's investigation typically passes over a variety of possible suspects until it lights at last on the least-likely person, his hard-boiled counterpart becomes emotionally involved in a complex process of changing implication.

Since he becomes emotionally and morally committed to some of the persons involved, or because crime poses some basic crisis in his image of himself, the hard-boiled detective remains unfulfilled until he has taken a personal moral stance toward the criminal. We find the detective forced to define his own concept of morality and justice, frequently in conflict with the social authority of the police, who represent symbolically the limitations, inadequacies, and subtle corruption of the institutions of law and order.

'Everything changes its meaning: the initial mission turns out to be a smokescreen for another, more devious plot; the supposed victim turns out to be the villain; the lover ends up as the murderess and the faithful friend as a rotten betrayer; the police and the

district attorney and often even the client keep trying to halt the investigation; and all the seemingly respectful and successful people turn out to be members of the gang.’ (Cawelti, 146)

The detective embodies the threat of judgment and execution to the villain, but the detective must also face assault, capture, drugging, blackjacking, and attempted assassination as regular features of his investigations.

The criminal is commonly a person of considerable political and social influence, a highly respectable member of society whose perverse acts have involved him with the underworld.

Finally the track leads back to the rich and respectable levels of society and exposes the corrupt relationship between the pillars of the community and the criminal underworld. As Westlake says: ‘The hardboiled detective story described the wreck of society to those who were living on the parts yet afloat.’ (Westlake, 8)

In contrast to the classical pattern of making the criminal a relatively obscure, marginal figure, a ‘least-likely’ person, the hard-boiled criminal usually plays a central role, sometimes *the* central role after the detective.

Facing such a criminal, the detective’s role changes from classical ratiocination to self-protection against the various threats, temptations and betrayals posed by the criminal.

Unlike the classical detective, for whom evil is an abnormal disruption of an essentially benevolent social order caused by a specific set of criminal motives, the hard-boiled detective has learned through long experience that evil is endemic to the social order.

The hard-boiled detective must therefore go beyond the solution to some kind of personal choice or action, and this action often reflected the writer’s own ideology.

The hard-boiled story usually ends with a confrontation between detective and criminal. Sometimes this is a violent encounter similar to the climactic showdown of many westerns.

The relationship between the western and colonial Australian crime fiction will be examined later in this exegesis. It is notable that the majority of colonial Australian fiction predates the emergency of the American western as a clearly defined genre.

*Noir* fiction, in America, can be understood as a development of the hardboiled style, which in many ways is an inversion of the chivalrous structures of the detective novel. In these later stories, the protagonist is usually not a detective, but instead either a victim, a suspect, or a perpetrator. He is someone tied directly to the crime, not an outsider called to solve or fix the situation. Other common characteristics include the self-destructive qualities of the protagonist. Freed from the clue-puzzle format of detective fiction the reader 'may know from the start whodunit' (Hilfer, xii). This type of fiction inherits the lean, direct writing style and the gritty realism commonly associated with hardboiled fiction, but the protagonist of *noir* fiction is dealing with the legal, political or other system that is no less corrupt than the perpetrator by whom the protagonist is either victimized or has to victimize, leading to a lose-lose situation.

Penzler, like some other scholars, leans toward 'keeping *noir* for the bad guys', and excludes from the genre the detective stories that are most associated with it: Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade are maintained in the separate category of hard-boiled because their detectives have a core of decency that makes them too close to 'white knights'.

Westlake comments that 'World War 1 had left people tired and alienated. World War 2 left them hopped-up, incomplete, wanting the party not to be over, but at the same time feeling lost and nostalgic for their pre-war lives. The war had gone on too long, had been too brutal, had changed too many things. Nobody could go home again.'

The *noir* novels of the postwar period cannot be considered detective novels, because there is no detective, and therefore must be considered crime novels closer in structure to the colonial Australian convict and bushranger criminal sagas. These *noir* crime novels therefore inverted the rational containment of the detective novel and in some cases were even parodic of its conventions.

‘The function of the detective hero is to guarantee the reader’s absolution from guilt. In contrast, the reader of the crime novel is manoeuvred into various forms of complicity... The central feature of the crime novel ,, is that guilt and innocence are problematic.’ (Hilfer, 2)

The purpose of the crime novel is not therefore to solve the mystery and why it happened, but to examine the effect of this crime on the protagonist and the characters around him.

As well as literature, *noir* is also generally recognized as *film noir*, the retrospective title given to a cycle of crime films made in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958) are usually considered the first and last films of the cycle. The French title literally means ‘black film’, and French writer Nino Frank is often credited with coining the term because of the resemblance to the *Série noire* crime novels. These black and white films are notable for their distinctively dark visual style, use of silhouette and shadow, disorienting camera angles, convoluted narratives, morally ambiguous characters, and their bleak outlook on life (Faison, 13)

Paul Schrader suggests that these movies were a reaction to ‘the acute downer which hit the US after the Second World War... The disillusionment many soldiers, small businessmen and housewife/factory workers felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film.’ (Schrader, 54)

*The Maltese Falcon* was adapted from the novel by Dashiell Hammett, and *The Killers* from a short story by Hemingway. Here the boundaries between the hard-boiled

style and *noir* become blurred, since many of the most iconic *noir* movies were adapted from novels generally considered to be hard-boiled. For the purposes of this exegesis, I will consider the hard-boiled style to be a sub-genre within *noir*, although as Schrader points out, *noir* is ‘not a genre. It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood.’ (Schrader, 53)

From this definition of *noir* the following characteristics can be identified: an ordinary protagonist drawn into adventure; the lack of a clear detective identified by Stephen Knight as ‘zero-detection’; a corrupt and venal society; and a tone of fatalism, cynicism and nihilism.

The following chapters will identify these same themes in Australian crime fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and discuss how these themes reflect the historical context of the time.

### **Chapter 3: *Robbery Under Arms* by Rolfe Boldrewood**

Australian crime fiction marked by duality and ambivalence is exemplified by *Robbery under Arms* by Rolfe Boldrewood.

Rolf Boldrewood was the pen-name of Thomas Brown (who, after 1884, gentrified the spelling of his name to Browne). He was born in London but came to Sydney at the age of five on a ship that was transporting convicts to the colony. He took up land first in New South Wales and tried hard to run a successful station and style himself as a gentleman landowner. At the age of 28 he was elected to the Melbourne Club. However after twenty-five years on the land he was forced to give up after a bad season in 1868. In 1871, following pressure deftly applied to influential relatives, he was appointed the Police Magistrate at Gulgong in New South Wales at £500 a year and as a Goldfields Commissioner. In 1880 he was promoted to Police Magistrate at Dubbo.

His career as a government official coincided with the exploits of bushrangers Ben Hall and Frank Gardiner, who were active in the Forbes area from 1860 to 1865. Many of the gang's exploits were fictionalised in *Robbery Under Arms*. Gardiner was arrested and charged in 1864. After a long manhunt, Ben Hall was ambushed by eight policemen in 1865 and died with thirty bullets in his back.

*Robbery Under Arms* was first published in serialized form by *The Sydney Mail* between July 1882 and August 1883, just three years after Ned Kelly had been hanged in Melbourne Gaol. It was then published in three volumes in London in 1888. It was edited into a single volume in 1889 as part of Macmillan's Colonial Library series and has not been out of print since.

The serialized story was an immediate success. The author himself later related how the weekly installment was awaited so expectantly at one outback station that once,

when it failed to arrive in the mail, the squatter wired to the postmaster of the next township to learn the gist of the missing chapter.

*Robbery Under Arms* can rightly be called a crime novel, and certainly falls within Steven Knight's definitions of a Bushranger Story and a Goldfield's Mystery (Knight, 1997, 13). Graeme Turner defends the book from criticism by Heseltine, who described it as 'undisturbed by any profound soul searching' and 'undemanding and romantic', by categorizing it as a 'ripping yarn': a well-constructed, exciting, popular adventure story, descended from the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott (Turner, 239). The influence of Scott on Boldrewood has been noted many times, and is admitted in the author's own preface to *Robbery Under Arms*.

The book begins with Dick Marston sitting in gaol, with just under one month before his scheduled execution for his crimes. He is given writing material, and begins documenting his life's story.

He starts with his childhood, with a father, Ben, who is a former convict prone to drinking, violence and crime; his mother, his sister, Aileen, and brother, Jim. Dick's first active involvement in crime comes when the brothers choose to go cattle duffing with their father, even though an offer of solid, honest work had been made with their neighbour and friend, George Storefield. The contrast between the lives of the brothers and that of George is a recurring theme, as they continue to meet up at different points throughout the story. This first theft includes their introduction to the dashing bushranger, Captain Starlight, his Aboriginal assistant, Warrigal, and their hideaway, Terrible Hollow.

Further thefts follow, leading up to the brazen theft of a thousand head of cattle, driven overland to Adelaide with Starlight (Chapter 11). This incident was based on the celebrated theft of a similar number of cattle from Bowen Downs station, Queensland, by Harry Redford in 1870 (Walker, 1965, 6)

The brothers are identified by the police, so they lie low in Melbourne, where they meet the sisters, Kate and Jeanie Morrison. The brothers return home for Christmas, leading to the capture and trial of Dick and Starlight. Warrigal helps Dick and Starlight escape from Berrima prison to the Hollow.

Then the gang bails up the Goulburn mail coach (Chapter 24). This incident is based on the robbery of the Braidwood mail coach south of Goulburn by the Hall Gang in 1865.

Starlight's gang next robs the bank at Ballabri, locking the police constable in his own cell (Chapter 25). This was loosely based on the raid on the bank at Canowindra by Ben Hall and his gang in 1863.

The brothers then move to the Turon goldfields. Their prosperity through honest, hard work gives them the chance for escape from the country to start a new life overseas. Jim is re-united with Jeanie Morrison and marries her. Dick meets Kate Morrison again, but in a fit of anger she betrays the brothers to the police, and they narrowly escape capture and return to the safety of the Hollow.

Seeing no alternative to crime, the gang joins forces with another bushranger, Dan Moran and his gang, to stage a major hold up of the armed, escorted stagecoach leaving the goldfields at Eugowra (Chapter 34). The gang ambush the gold escort, opening fire without warning. The commanding officer, Sergeant Hawkins, is killed in the first volley. Five other constables are shot and injured, and left tied up and bleeding while the gang escapes with the gold and cash. This is a direct fictionalization of the exploits of Frank Gardiner. In June 1862 he bailed up the Lachlan Gold Escort near Eugowra with a gang including Ben Hall, Dan Charters and Johnny Gilbert. This hold up is considered to be the largest gold robbery in Australian history. The total value of the 2,700 ounces of gold and bank-notes taken was estimated at £14,000.



Starlight's gang hears word of Moran's planned home invasion of a police informant named Mr Whitman, at a time when Mr Whitman was known to be absent. Dick Marston and Starlight intervene, forcing Moran and his men to leave, thus creating animosity with Moran that will develop through the book.

At the height of their infamy, the gang attends the Turon horse race incognito, where Starlight's horse, Rainbow, wins.

Ben Marston is later ambushed and wounded by bounty hunters. Moran, nearby, releases him, and shoots all four bounty hunters in cold blood, highlighting the different honour codes between the two gangs (Chapter 37). This is a retelling of an event from January 1867, when a party of four Special Police led by John Carroll was ambushed by the bushrangers Thomas and John Clarke. Two policemen were killed in the first exchange of gunfire. The other two officers were captured, made to kneel, and were then shot at close range.

Ben returns to the Hollow, and is nursed by his daughter, Aileen. Aileen and Starlight begin a relationship, and arrange to marry.

Despite the animosity between the rival gangs, they team up again to rob the Goldfield Commissioner, Mr Knightley, who is believed to have gold at his home. They are met with more resistance than they expect. One of Moran's associates is shot in the skirmish, and Moran is keen to kill Knightley when they capture him. Starlight turns the tables by giving Mr Knightley one of his own pistols. He then proceeds to arrange for Knightley's wife to go to Bathurst and withdraw some cash, and meet Moran's men by 'the Black Stump, outside of Bathurst town. The incident was based on the attack on Gold Commissioner Keightley's home at Dunn's Plains. Bushranger Michael Burke was wounded in the stomach and, believing he was about to die, shot himself in the head.

Throughout the book, there are chance meetings with Dick's childhood friend and neighbour, George Storefield who, in contrast with the Marston boys, works hard, keeps

within the law and thrives financially. Towards the end of the book, Dick starts to hold up George, now a successful grazier, businessman, magistrate and landholder, before realizing who he is. George offers the brothers safe haven and cattle mustering work, which would allow Dick, Starlight and Jim to travel safely to Townsville in Queensland, from where they plan to leave to San Francisco. They accept the offer, but they are betrayed by Warrigal and Kate Morrison and are confronted by a party of seven police troopers. In the ensuing gun battle Starlight and Jim Marston are shot dead. Dick is wounded (Chapter 49).

Dick is brought to trial, bringing the story to where it began, with Dick expecting to be hanged shortly.

In the final chapters, Dick's sentence is reduced to fifteen years' imprisonment due to petitions from Storefield, Knightley and other prominent people. He serves twelve years and is visited occasionally by Gracey Storefield. When he is released Dick marries Gracey, and together they move to a remote area of Queensland to manage a station for her brother, George Storefield.

Throughout the book, as Dick Marston's life becomes increasingly mired in crime, he repeatedly laments that his life would have been better if he had simply kept on the straight and narrow:

*'I thought, too...how we might have been ten times, twenty times, as happy if we'd only kept on steady ding-dong work, like George Storefield, having patience and seeing ourselves get better off—even a little—year by year.'* (p. 113)

This dichotomy between crime and honest work, between the Marstons and the Storewoods, is central to the book, but also central to Boldrewood's world view. The character of Storewood, the diligent landowner who slowly builds his farm into a major landholding and stock business, and becomes a magistrate with the social connections

necessary to secure Dick Marston's freedom, is clearly based on Boldrewood himself. More than that, it is a projection of Boldrewood's ambitions, since he was unsuccessful as a farmer and never quite achieved the same level of financial and social success as Storefield.

Callahan points out that the character of the 'Anglicized squire' is a recurring theme of Boldrewood's early fiction and that 'he would never stray far from the squattocracy to which he related.' Boldrewood's fiction concentrated on 'narratives of middle-class consolidation and affirmation, in which the threat comes not so much from the unidentifiable but from the overidentified standards of Englishness to which middle-class Australians aspired: that an Australian gentleman will not be recognized as an English gentleman, that his surfaces will be unconvincing, that he will not be able 'to pass'. Thus much of Boldrewood's fiction inhabits the realm of over-earnest assertion and colonial cringe of the most revealingly craven kind.' (Callahan, 13)

*Robbery Under Arms* was however a significant departure from his other fiction, since he allowed the Marstons to question the patrician attitudes of the squatters, as illustrated in this exchange between Marston and Storefield:

*'It's always the way.'* I said, bitter-like. *'As soon as a poor man's got a chance of a decent crop, the season turns against him or prices go down. So that he never gets a chance.'*

*'It's as bad for the rich man, isn't it?'* said George. *'It's God's will, and we can't make or mend things by complaining.'*

*'I don't know about that,'* I said sullenly. *'But it's not as bad for the rich man. Even if the squatters suffer by a drought and lose their stock, they've more stock and money in the bank, or else credit to fall back on; while the like of us lose all we have in the world, and no one would lend us a pound afterwards to save our lives....'*

*Oh, if you like to bow and scrape to rich people, well and good... but that's not my way. We have as good a right to our share of the land and some other good things as they have, and why should we be done out of it?'*...

*'If we pay for the land as they do, certainly,' said George.*

*'But why should we pay? God Almighty, I suppose, made the land and the people too, one to live on the other. Why should we pay for what is our own? I believe in getting my share somehow....Nonsense or not, if a dry season comes and knocks all our work over, I shall help myself to some one's stuff that has more than he knows what to do with... I've heard all that before; but ain't there lots of people that have made their money by all sorts of villainy, that look as well as their best, and never see a gaol?... I don't think it pays to be too honest in a dry country.'* (p.64)

Confronted by the adversity of the landscape, the climate and the squattocracy, most poor rural workers like the Marstons would occasionally turn to crime to survive. In *The Australian Legend*, Russel Ward suggests that 'every honest bushman, more or less, is a thief upon occasion, at least from the point of view of the law. According to his own code, however, the theft of certain kinds of property, especially livestock or food, from government, squatters or 'swells', was at worst a trifling peccadillo and at best a moral and praiseworthy act.' (Ward, 161)

Boldrewood himself seems caught by a duality, one of several that will be examined here: that Australia is a land of opportunity for working men, but success is hampered by a society controlled by wealthy landowners. This contradiction is evident in two speeches given by Dick Marston:

*'This was the best country in the whole world,' he used to say, 'for a gentleman who was poor or a working man.' The first could always make an independence if they were moderately strong. Liked work, and did not drink... as for the poor man,*

*he was the real rich man in Australia: high wages, cheap food, lodging, clothing, travelling. What more did he want? He could save money, live happily, and die rich, if he wasn't a fool or a rogue.'* (p. 66)

*'Every one of you gentlemen wants to be a small God Almighty...You'd like to break us all in and put us in yokes and bows, like a lot of working bullocks.'* (p.82)

Boldrewood sympathetically portrays the Marstons as victims of their circumstances. When bushrangers, or criminals in general, are brought up in his work he was repeatedly sympathetic to the social contexts behind their condition, and is not prepared to damn anyone at first sight for what they do or have done, given that what he considers as their character is so much more important to him. 'It is honorableness that Boldrewood values, something which can survive going off the rails under the influence of unhelpful social pressures. Such an assessment on Boldrewood's part can be seen as an impulse to classlessness.' (Callahan, 20)

The motivations towards crime are made clear by Boldrewood. Money is explicitly ruled out: *'I never cared for money'*, says Dick, although Dick still admits to the ambition of *'riding about the country on a fine horse, eating and drinking of the best, and only doing what people said half the old settlers made their money by'* (p.48). Dick's sense 'of class subordination and exclusion is stronger than avarice', though, and his need for an enlivening adventure is easily recognized. (Turner, 243)

*Some people can work away day after day, and year after year, like a bullock in a team or a horse in a chaff-cutting machine. It's all the better for them if they can, although I suppose they never enjoy themselves except in a cold-blooded sort of way. But there's other men that can't do that sort of thing, and it's no use talking, they must have life and liberty and a free range.* (p.71)

It is in the tension that arises from the author's attempt to resolve the conflict 'between his hero's rampant, anti-social freedom and his own conventional responses reflected in the narrative persona' that the book both gains vitality and achieves significance in the evolution of an Australian literature (Rosenberg, 14).

Boldrewood is 'struggling to assert colonial authenticity at the same time as he is valorising England as the peak of human reference points. His Australia extends a politics of optimistic solidarity not merely to his own class but to all classes. This lies clearly within Australian myths of egalitarianism' (Callahan, 21). This nascent Australian nationalism took definite form in the class struggle between the landless majority and the land-monopolizing squatters. (Ward, 153)

Thus it is that Hodge and Mishra are able to say that 'Boldrewood worked with the romantic image of the bushranger, appropriating it on behalf of a progressive politics' (Hodge & Mishra, 140) or, in De Serville's words, Boldrewood was 'on the liberal wing of the squatters' (De Serville, 67).

The novel's apparent moral ambivalence, which produces the ambiguous representation of the bushrangers and their antithesis, Storefield, 'is not the symptom of an artistic failing, but the manifestation of a deep fissure in Victorian and colonial ideology. If Boldrewood is unable to close this fissure, he is by no means alone. Indeed, the conflict is conventional within the imperialist adventure stories of the late nineteenth century, whether they be produced by a Kipling or a Conrad' (Turner, 241).

Boldrewood creates another duality with his two bushranger characters: Captain Starlight and Dan Moran.

Ward suggests that in nineteenth century Australia bushranging was so widespread, and so strongly supported by public sympathy that it amounted to a 'national institution'. Australia had taken part in no great wars and had no colourful military

figures; it had no founding fathers or great statesman to serve as symbols of national sentiment.

The pastoral proletariat tended to look upon the bushrangers as 'symbolic of resistance to constituted authority... and the desperadoes could not have existed for long if it had not been for the almost universal sympathy and support of the bush proletariat.' MacArthur wrote; 'The sympathies of the majority of the inhabitants are in favour of the criminals, whom they would rather screen from punishment than deliver over to justice.' Bushrangers were only men who did openly, professionally and on a grand scale what every bushman did furtively and sporadically (Ward, 151).

Both Ben Hall and Ned Kelly made strong statements of a Republican nature, and there was a 'folk-feeling that bushrangers symbolized the national spirit' (Ward, 174).

However Boldrewood balks at making his romantic bushranger a national symbol: Captain Starlight is a renegade from a noble English family. Boldrewood stated that the hero was really 'a composite of several persons. One of them, he said, 'was Midnight, an undeveloped bushranger, a horse thief variously known as Thomas Law alias George Gibson alias Henry Wilson who was finally tracked down and mortally wounded by the police at Maranoa station on the Queensland border in 1878' (Walker, 1965, 6).

For Starlight, what is important is not the vulgar business of money and property but the game of testing both the limits of authority and the membrane of life. Paul de Serville refers to Boldrewood's light approach to the presence of death in his work, which Boldrewood defies by 'a high-spirited determination that his protagonists should have fun if they possibly can.' (Callahan, 19)

Starlight refers to their doings as acts of folly, but '*hardly crime*' (p.320). Their 'folly' is natural, a failure to be continually stable and dull, and is 'almost admirable' (Turner, 243).

The bushranger Starlight is, like Raffles, who will be discussed later, a black sheep aristocrat for whom a place in Victorian England cannot be found, and whose nonchalant character is marked by ennui, boredom, and the need for adventure (Turner, 248). He fits within the established pattern of British 'ripping yarns' established by the likes of Kipling, Stevenson and Ballantyne, which were the articulation of British nationalist virtues accomplished through foreign adventures of conquest.

That Boldrewood should choose to make his hero an expatriate Englishman of high rank and good breeding rather than a native born colonial, as were most of the chief bushrangers of the 'sixties, is again a reflection of the author's circumstances and ideals, and his deference to the English ideal of the gentleman. Dick Marston reflects:

*But it's a strange thing that I don't think there's any place in the world where men feel a more real out-and-out respect for a gentleman than in Australia. Everyone's supposed to be free and equal now; of course, they couldn't be in convict days. But somehow a man that's born and bred a gentleman will always be different from other men to the end of the world. (p.59)*

Starlight appears to live outside the Australian mythic discourse of the novel. He seems extraneous because he is articulating Boldrewood's ideal of the English gentleman, a 'nexus of values and behaviour that necessarily finds its realization within society and not secluded from it. On the other hand, he also embodies the larrikin element of the stereotyped Australian male identity' (Callahan, 16).

His gentlemanly conduct is noted at several points during the novel, where he treats the victims of his crimes with good grace and manners:



*Miss Falkland...spoke to Starlight first. 'I have never seen you before, but I have often heard of you, Captain Starlight, if you will allow me to address you by that title. Believe me when I say that by your conduct tonight you have won our deepest gratitude- more than that, our respect and regard. Whatever may be your future career, whatever the fate of your wild life may end in, always believe that there are those who will think of you, pray for you, rejoice in your escapes, and sorrow sincerely for your doom.'* (p.303)

Not the least fascinating thing in *Robbery Under Arms* is the silent conflict in the mind of its author: 'romantic Rolf Boldrewood, story teller, rejoices in daring deeds, hard riding, swift horses, but Thomas Browne, police magistrate, gravely rebukes all lawlessness. It is said that some of his friends reproached him with presenting too favourable a picture of the criminals, but his wife and family on the other hand would not suffer him to bring Starlight to a bad end. He compromised by granting the outlaw a hero's rather than a felon's death' (Walker, 1965, 12).

Starlight is gunned down in a final showdown with his nemesis, Sir Ferdinand Morringer, a character clearly modeled on Sir Frederick Pottinger, a British baronet who became a Police Inspector in New South Wales and spent many years chasing the bushrangers Frank Gardiner and Ben Hall. Despite his title and position as an English gentleman, Pottinger was charged on several occasions for misconduct, and was publically criticized in the NSW parliament by Cowper and Harpur. It is significant that Starlight can only be vanquished by another English gentleman. As Starlight lies dying from his wounds Morringer kneels beside him and consoles him with the line: *'Don't fret – there's a good fellow. Fortune of war, you know.'*

Starlight dies in the same gunfight as Jim Marston, but the native-born bushranger is not accorded such a romantic death or granted any last words. Where Dick's

narrative grants Starlight two pages for his death, he gives his brother only a brief paragraph:

*Jim and Sir Ferdinand let drive straight at one another the same minute. They both meant it this time. Sir Ferdinand's hat turned part round on his head, but poor old Jim drops forward on his face and tears up the grass with his hands. I knew what that sign meant. (p.420)*

While Starlight represents the mythical, romantic and symbolic legend of the bushranger, Moran represents the dark reality.

Boldrewood based Moran on Daniel 'Mad Dog' Morgan, a bushranger active during the 1860s and responsible for three cold-blooded murders prior to being surrounded by police and gunned down in 1865. Boldrewood treats the fictional Moran in exactly the same way as the historical Morgan: cruel and murderous, black-hearted and snake-eyed. Walker says that Moran epitomizes all the evil features of the robbers, the Marstons all the good (Walker, 1965, 8). This seems disingenuous since the Marstons either participate directly or are accessories to all the crimes committed by the gang. There are only issues of motive at play. Moran is showed as a two-dimensional representation of evil, whereas the Marston brothers are depicted as naïve adventurers, pressured into crime by rural poverty and lured by romantic notions of freedom.

As a Justice of the Peace and then as a Police Magistrate and Gold Commissioner, Boldrewood probably became acquainted with policemen who had fought the bushrangers and, moreover, Henry Zouch, the experienced superintendent of police in the southern district in which much of the highway robbery took place, was the cousin of Boldrewood's wife (Walker, 1965, 5). Boldrewood was therefore well placed to write about the conflict between the police and bushrangers.

While working on the diggings he would have seen that the most prominent feature of the diggers ethos was their hatred of the police. 'Practically every contemporary writer stresses this feature of goldfields life and even the most conservative tacitly agree that members of the force, by their venality, arrogance, brutality and incompetence, did much to earn the contempt in which they were held' (Ward, 127).

Russel Ward quotes a Bendigo store-keeper:

*Robberies as daring and cruel as those of the highwaymen are hourly committed by the representatives of the Government. The whole system is bad...the commissioners and all the staff of government officers are miserably underpaid but then every opportunity is afforded them of obtaining money by means of legal plunder.*

He goes on to explain that fines for license evasion and sly-grog selling were divided between the constable who apprehended the offender, the sergeant of his staff and the Gold Commissioners. The consequence was, he says, that to augment their income the commissioners and their underlings privately encouraged sly-grog selling and made the simple purchasing of a license as difficult as possible. The report of the Commission which inquired into the causes of Eureka Rebellion of 1854 confirmed the accuracy of this picture.

One digger described the Ballarat camp as 'a kind of legal store where justice was bought and sold, bribery being the governing element of success, and perjury the base instrument of baser minds to victimize honest and honourable men, thus defeating the ends of justice.' (Molony, 51)

When the police did arrive on the diggings to inspect licenses 'the orders of the officers could not be heard, from the loud and continuous roars of 'Joe! Joe! Joe! - Damn the bloody Government! - the beaks, the traps, commissioners, and all! - the

robbers, the bushrangers' and every other vile epithet that could be remembered, almost into their ears' (Ward, 118).

From the point of view of the old hands on the diggings, the police force was composed mainly of renegades from their own ranks and of their natural enemies: the new chums freshly arrived in the colony. There were also a large proportion of discharged soldiers and military pensioners. By consenting to act as constables they broke the first principle of 'government men' and bush workers; that of loyalty to one's mates.

The distrust of the police and Government, and the close ties of egalitarianism, solidarity and mateship between the diggers, resulted in law and order being maintained more by the force of collective public opinion rather than state power, resulting in a pattern of behaviour where the whole body of assembled miners acted as judge, jury and executioner.

When founded in 1789 the New South Wales Police force consisted entirely of convicts. This was a necessity because the New South Wales Corps under Major Robert Ross thought that police work was not the duty of the marines and their officers, who considered themselves gentlemen. Governor Phillips was forced to create a night watch out of convicts. Judge Advocate David Collins wrote of this paradox: 'It was to have been wished that a watch established for the preservation of public and private property had been formed of free people and that necessity had not compelled us...to appoint them from a body of men in whose eyes, it could not be denied, the property of individuals has never before been sacred. But there was not any choice.' (Keneally, 2007, 238).

When one of the night watch stopped a marine in the convicts' compound, Ross viewed it as an insult and Phillips was forced, wearily, to ensure it did not happen again.

Throughout the nineteenth century there are constant complaints that most Australian policemen were corrupt, drunken, cowardly, brutal and inefficient:

*There was a force called the Field Police, who were volunteer convicts that had served a certain time, and by additional service got a ticket-of-leave or emancipation. They were hated by all classes, for they had power without principle. Very few of them, I believe, but would have sworn a man's life away for a crown.'* (Ward, 156)

An editorial in the *Empire* of 1853 wrote:

*The sovereign majesty of the Sydney Police, owing to the former penal character of the colony, is under no constitutional restrictions...They have a roving commission to go into the highways and byways to suspend the liberty of the subject in the exercise of their discriminating infallible 'suspicion'.* (Ward, 158)

Frustration at the police's continued lack of success against bushranging, in particular against Ben Hall and his gang, led the NSW government to introduce more and more draconian legislation, first with the Police Act of 1862, which gave the police sweeping powers to act with little oversight.

In the sixties the low regard expressed by the ruling class of respectable and propertied men for the official guardians of life, law, and property was palpable. This was due in part to their origin. Hated by their fellow convicts and despised by free men, placed under inept leadership in their formative years, and long characterized by drunkenness, brutality, and incompetence, the police were accused of continuing acts of tyranny by such respectable public figures as Parkes, Lucas, Maclean, and Rusden.

The radical goldfields MP James Hoskins compared the new structure of the NSW police to the Royal Irish Constabulary: a semi-military force designed to suppress

dangerous political agitation in addition to crime. Fearful of strong action against riotous diggers, Hoskins complained that a 'weapon of terror' was being created (Walker, 1964, 210).

Radical or nationalist journals often made constable-baiting a major theme. *The Stockwhip* earnestly castigated the police force for its corruption and nepotism. *The Bulletin* employed a lighter but more stinging approach. Its method was to assume that policemen were, as a body, irredeemably venal, craven, lazy, incompetent and pettily tyrannical and to take it for granted that these were facts well known to all Australians (Ward, 159).

Despite increased powers and almost no oversight, the police were still ill-equipped to catch the bushrangers. As well as having ill-trained, drunken and inept officers with few bush skills, they were poorly armed. They were equipped with obsolete single-shot muzzle-loaded rifles and pistols, where the bushrangers often had the latest revolving pistols and repeating rifles. The police were riding 'old screw' horses that were no match for the bushrangers' racehorses, stolen from the best stables in the territory. The quality of the bushrangers' horses is mentioned repeatedly in *Robbery Under Arms*: notably Starlight's horse, Rainbow, which wins the Turon Race incognito, and Warrigal's 'brute of a horse' Bilbah, praised for its stamina (Walker, 1965, 212). Bushrangers derived added prestige merely from being, so to speak, the professional opponents of the police.

The activities of Ben Hall's gang and the inefficiencies of the police were discussed almost daily in the NSW Parliament. As a result, the government rushed through the Felons Apprehension Act 1865 (NSW). The Act enabled the gang to be outlawed and made it possible for anyone to shoot them without first calling on them to surrender or waiting for them to commit an offence, rather than arrest them and go to trial. People

named in the summons were expected to give themselves up. Anyone found to be harbouring or assisting the bushrangers were also considered to be felons.

Ben Hall's hiding place was betrayed to police by an accomplice who was safeguarding Hall's escape money. Troopers arrived at Ben Hall's camp before dawn on the 5th May 1865, but waited until sunrise so they could identify him. When the plain-clothes but armed men emerged from the bush, Hall ran in the opposite direction before being shot in the shoulder and back.

Hall called out to this friend Billy Dargin, an Aboriginal tracker who was close by: 'I am dying! I am dying! Shoot me dead', Hall having previously vowed 'they'll never hang Ben Hall'. The other troopers continued firing after he hit the ground. The police report stated that 30 bullets were found in his body.

The Felons Apprehension Act had been passed by the NSW Parliament on 28th April, but the final proclamation was not due to be signed by the Governor until 10th May. Only after that time could Hall be officially declared an outlaw. Therefore the shooting of Hall on 5th May had no force of law and may be considered an extra-judicial murder.

A decade later the Victorian police were similarly unable to apprehend the Kelly Gang and so they decided to emulate NSW and passed their own Felons Apprehension Act in 1878. Normal rights under the law, including 'assumption of innocence', were revoked for those persons named by a Supreme Court warrant under the Act. The offenders were legally considered guilty without trial. Two years later the Kelly Gang were shot down at Glenrowan. The bodies of Dan Kelly, Joe Byrne and Steven Hart were put on public display while Ned Kelly was taken to Melbourne and executed.

Boldrewood was again caught in a contradiction. The prevailing sentiment in NSW at the time was of contempt towards the police force, both for the individual police

officers, who were corrupt and inept, and for the force as a whole, who were seen as an autonomous military arm of government.

Although he allows the police to be fooled and thwarted on several occasions, he is loath to represent them in a bad light and largely conceals the public contempt into which the troopers fell in Ben Hall's days. He does however acknowledge that the bushrangers were supported by the rural working poor, and that the police were seen as being on the side of the squatters. Jim Marston says:

*It's a queer thing, but the only people that ever showed fight against us, except the police, were the gentlemen—the swells, as we called them— and a good share of the fellows shot dropped to their guns. The regular station hands, the small farmers, the labourers, didn't trouble their heads about us. They'd eat out of the same dish, and there was no chance of their informing against us unless they had some very particular reason of their own. They'd rather help us a bit, and often did.*  
(p.428)

Dick Marston also makes his lack of respect for the police evident:

*Any man might take a turn at that sort of thing, now and then, and not be such a bad chap after all. It was the duty of the police to catch him. If they caught him, well and good, it was so much the worse for him: if they didn't, that was their lookout. It wasn't anybody else's business anyhow. And a man that wasn't caught, or that got turned up at his trial, was about as good as the general run of people, and there was no reason for anyone to look shy at him.* (p.145)

Dick's father sees the police as simply an extension of the oppression he suffered as a convict, and expresses his own sense of nihilistic fatalism when he says:



*'whose business was it to have learned me better? That I can't rightly say, but it seemed it was the business of the Government people to gaol me, and iron me and flog me, was that justice? Any man's sense'll tell him it wasn't. It's been them and me for it since I got my liberty and if I had had a dozen lives they'd have gone the same road!'* (p.370)

Boldrewood creates two police characters in *Robbery Under Arms*: Sergeant Goring, the officer in charge of the search for Starlight and his gang, and Sir Ferdinand Morringer, the Inspector of Police. Goring gets close to the gang on many occasions, and when the Marstons first meet Starlight at the Hollow he has been shot while evading Goring. When Goring searches the Marston's home Boldrewood states that *'the troopers were civil enough, and Goring, the senior constable, tried to comfort them (Marston's mother and sister) as much as he could. He knew it was no fault of theirs.'* When Goring catches Dick Marston, the bushranger comments that his captor was *'earning his bread honest, anyway, and he was a chap as liked the fun and dash of a mounted policeman's life.'* Later he comments that Goring *'had been a swell, something like Starlight. A good many young fellows that don't drop into fortunes when they come out here take to the police in Australia, and very good men they make. They like the half-soldiering kind of life, and if they stick steady at their work, and show pluck and gumption, they mostly get promoted.'*

Marston's deference to Goring as a gentleman seems at odds with the sentiments of bushrangers of the period. When a bushranger named Jenkins was hanged in 1834 he stood on the gallows and told the crowd: *'if any of you take to the bush, shoot every tyrant you come across, and there are several now in the yard who ought to be served so.'* It created such a sensation that Governor Burke ordered that bushrangers should no longer be executed in public. (Ward, 159)

Goring dies a hero's death in the final shootout with Starlight, the policeman and the bushranger shooting each other in the same volley.

Sir Ferdinand Morringer is shown similar deference: *'Nobody can deny he looks like a gentleman; my word, he'll put some of these Weddin Mountain chaps thro' their facin's, you'll see,' says one miner... 'he's a manly-looking chap and shows blood.'*

Boldrewood portrays the rivalry between Starlight and Morringer as a duel between two gentleman, and as Starlight lies dying he tells Morringer that it was all good sport: *'Well, the game's up now, isn't it? I've held some good cards too, but they never told, somehow.'*

The real Sir Frederick Pottinger did not command the same respect. His inability to capture Ben Hall led to him being given the nickname Blind Freddie, a colloquialism that is still in use today. In May 1863 the Inspector-General had directed the police to act on their own initiative to capture the bushranger. Early in January 1865, hoping to lure Hall into the open, Pottinger rode in the Wowingragong horse races in direct breach of police regulations. He was dismissed from the police force in February. A month later he was riding in a stagecoach through the Blue Mountains on his way to Sydney to seek redress, when folklore has it that he stopped the coach so that he could vault an orchard fence to collect some cherries for the ladies on the coach. Whilst showing off he landed badly, and the small pistol that he kept in his waistcoat pocket accidentally discharged, shooting him in the belly. He died the following day, a month before Ben Hall was killed by police.

Boldrewood's understanding of the causes and circumstances of bushranging in the sixties was sound. He knew that most of the offenders were native born and emphasized the public shock at the realization that the wave of crime could not be blamed on imported felons. In his view the native youth, being reared without the beneficent influences of church and school (and Boldrewood was inclined to stress that the latter

was the greater deprivation), were gradually drawn by circumstances, rather than by any inherent wickedness, into cattle duffing and then into more serious crimes. (Walker, 1965, 208)

Oddly, this makes Boldrewood almost prescient: invoking the alibis of social control and the subordination of the individual to the group which were yet to attain hegemony over our narrative heritage. 'Paradoxically, his novel is also one of the last locations of even an ambiguously individualist view of Australian experience.' (Turner, 250)

Dick and Jim Marston, both well-intentioned young men, are pulled down by their family connections, their love of horses and adventure, the temptations fostered by the periods of idleness in bush life, and the lure of easy wealth. (Walker, 1964, 9)

Even when they give up bushranging to take up honest work on the goldfields, they feel that fate is against them and they have little recourse but to return to bushranging:

*We were to stick up the next monthly gold escort... A desperate chance, but we were desperate men. We had tried to work hard and honest. We had done so for the best part of a year. No one could say we had taken the value of a halfpenny from any man. And yet we were not let stay right when we asked for nothing but to be let alone and live out the rest of our lives like men. (p.280)*

This passage is notable for the lack of guilt that Marston displays for his previous bushranging. He suggests that his past crimes should be expunged by a year of honest toil at the diggings, and is almost blaming his return to crime on Kate Morrison for betraying him, and the police for driving him back into hiding. Up until that point their crimes had been cattle theft and armed robbery of the Goulbourn mail coach and the bank at Ballibri. Nobody had been hurt in these crimes, so perhaps Marston shares Starlight's view that they are folly and 'hardly crime'. However the gold robbery at Eugowra is different, and Marston describes it as '*my first regular battle.*' The sergeant

is killed and five other officers are wounded, three of them badly. Marston shows little remorse, and expresses the nihilistic fatalism common throughout the works considered here:

*We were all sorry for Sergeant Hawkins, and would have been better pleased if he'd been only wounded like the others. But these sorts of things couldn't be helped. It was the fortune of war; his luck this time, ours next. We knew what we had to expect. Nothing would make much difference.* (p. 291)

This is the same fortune of war that Starlight claims whilst dying, and the fatalistic metaphor of a card game that Starlight uses at the end of the book is foreshadowed by Dick Marston as he sits in his cell at the beginning of the book, preparing to tell his story.

*I could cry like a child when I think of it now. I have cried many's the time and often since I have been shut up here, and dashed my head against the stones till I pretty nigh knocked all sense and feeling out of it, not so much in repentance, though I don't say I don't feel sorry, but to think what a fool, fool, fool I'd been. Yes, fool, three times over — a hundred times — to put my liberty and life against such a miserable stake — a stake the devil that deals the pack is so safe to win at the end.*  
(p.48)

Again, Marston shows little remorse for his crimes, only a sense of foolishness that he has gambled his freedom in a game of chance and lost. He repeats this half-hearted penitence towards the end of the book, as he awaits the gallows:

*I did repent in that sort of way of all we'd done since that first wrong turn .... but as for the rest I had only a dull, heavy feeling that my time was come, and I must make the best of it, and meet it like a man.* (p.431)

His fatalism echoes the last words of Ned Kelly. On the scaffold Kelly sighed and said: 'Ah well, I suppose it had to come to this.' He did not say, as tradition more romantically has it. 'Such is life'. (Seal, 161)

Several dualities in Boldrewood's work have already been noted, but the most difficult, and the one he fails to resolve, is the contradiction between his civic duty as a magistrate and his romantic inclinations as a writer.

*Robbery Under Arms* 'has it both ways: on the one hand, the novel is a moral fable and, on the other, it makes adventure more exciting than the lack of it' (Turner, 242).

*Robbery Under Arms* therefore displays the moral ambiguity that is central to Australian crime fiction at this time. This duality is identified by Hodge and Mishra as a 'doublet', images and values which appear simultaneously in two opposed and compatible forms, such as 'the image of convicts and bushrangers alike as both heroes and scum' with these ambiguities 'deriving from its double source from above and below' (Hodge & Mishra, 119). The bushranger myth serves a purpose for those in authority: an embodiment of their paranoia about social unrest from the lower classes, which allows them to justify greater powers of control.

The bushranger myth is also fuelled from below, the 'vicarious revenge of the weak against the strong' (Seal, 126). The use of the myth to strengthen the resolve of the underclass only serves to increase the paranoia of those in authority.

Hodge and Mishra suggest that 'contemporary Australia is in some respects only a more complex and extensive disciplinary machine than Botany Bay was in 1800.'

Similar mechanisms can be seen in present day with the paranoia generated around outlaw motorcycle gangs, Islamic terrorist groups, and internet hackers and whistleblowers. The authorities use the paranoia to justify increased legal powers aimed directly at these groups, which may impact on the privacy and basic human

rights of the general populations, and these groups adopt imagery and values from the Outlaw Legend to legitimize their anti-authoritarian activities.

Hodge and Mishra conclude that there is 'not a single image of criminal...that defines Australian culture. On the contrary, what the culture contains is a rich and complex meaning-resource, one that allows a range of different issues of power and authority to be explored or mystified or both' (Hodge & Mishra, 140)

Boldrewood's novel seems to sit right in the middle of what may be a key set of oppositions. In it, Australia is both 'the domain of the adventure and a context to be survived rather than celebrated' (Turner, 250). It is both challenge and leveler, the familiar 'double aspect' of Australian writing identified by Judith Wright.

Wright identifies this 'double aspect' as the outer equivalent of an inner reality: first, and persistently, the reality of exile; second, the reality of newness and freedom. From the beginning of settlement there were rebels who hoped to make in Australia a country that would lead the world towards new concepts of human freedom, men who saw Australia as a great opportunity to establish utopia, 'meet cradle for the birth sublime of just Equality', as the poet Harpur put it. (Wright, xii)

The sense of exile identified by Wright chimes strongly with the sense of alienation identified in *Robbery Under Arms* and which is central to *noir* fiction. The protagonist Dick Marston is a native-born hero, outlaw though he may be, who has been described by Russel Ward as 'the noble bushman', the romanticized figure at home on horseback anywhere in the interior, and standing as a symbol of emergent nationalism. There is at least some evidence in *Robbery Under Arms* and elsewhere that Boldrewood conceived of bushranging as a form of social protest and thus a stride toward a new nationalism (Rosenberg, 13).

But Boldrewood is still presented with a moral ambiguity. The story, according to Cecil Hadgraft, presents its audience with 'the problem of moral responsibility,' which

Boldrewood solves in part by killing off Starlight, sentencing Dick to prison only to be 'released years later, a reformed grey-beard', and peppering the narrative 'with brief pious reflections, miniature moralisings' (Rosenberg, 14). But these resolutions seem pat, and almost as if Boldrewood was pre-empting the criticism he was to receive for romanticizing the bushranger.

*'If it was England the whole countryside would rise up and hunt such scoundrels down like mad dogs, but in a colony like this people didn't seem to know right from wrong.'* (p. 203)

To Boldrewood the bushrangers were only 'half-and-half bad', for he knew that they were putting good qualities to a perverted use. Glorifying in daring adventure, they usually avoided brutality, treated women with consideration, respected 'gameness', and sometimes at least refrained from robbing the poor.

Some years after he had written *Robbery Under Arms* Browne indeed spoke of bushranging and highway robbery as 'a world-old protest against the dullness of respectability, the greed of industrialism, the selfishness of property'. (Walker, 1965, 14)

In many ways *Robbery Under Arms* might be considered a Western. In 1901 the American writer Owen Wister wrote to George Brett, his editor at Macmillan, and acknowledged receiving from Brett a copy of *Robbery Under Arms*. He noted that reading it had 'made active again my intention long ago expressed to Remington, and very naturally added weight to my belief that a long book is 'waiting' for me' (Graulich, 2).

Up until that time stories of the Western frontier had been in the form of short stories that appeared in periodicals and dime novels, and were sensationalist in nature. Impressed by Boldrewood's achievement of a full-length novel, Wister went on to complete *The Virginian*, generally regarded to be the first modern Western novel.

It was however only the length and ambition that Wister took from Boldrewood. The style and the moral standpoint were distinctly different. Wister defined a 'new kind of thematic conflict between the free and easy way of life of the West and the over-civilized, corrupt culture of the east.' The West was a place where people rediscovered and reaffirmed the most important values of life (Cawelti, 215).

The element that most clearly defines the western is the symbolic landscape in which it takes place and the influence this landscape has on the character and actions of the hero. This symbolic landscape is a field of action that centres upon 'the point of encounter between civilization and wilderness, settled society and lawless openness'. The western hero finds himself placed between the old life and the new, with the responsibility for taking those actions that will bring about the final destruction of the old life and the establishment of settled society. The fact that this resolution almost inevitably requires 'a transcendent and heroic violence' indicates that the contending forces of civilization and wilderness reflect strongly conflicting values. This landscape is a place where deep truths of human nature and life, hidden in the East by the artifices and traditions of civilization, are being known again. 'Wister's image of the West is dominated by the theme of moral regeneration. Wister's main thesis is that the kind of individual moral courage and community responsibility embodied in the (western) code is a vital part of the American tradition and needs to be reawakened in modern American society' (Cawelti, 193).

Here the contrast between the American western and the Australian colonial crime story is stark, and brings to mind again Keneally's assertion that American settlers 'saw themselves as the redeemed, whereas the first European Australians saw themselves as the damned' (Keneally, 1993, 52).

At the beginning of Wister's novel, the Virginian confronts his nemesis Trampas over a card game and puts him down with the immortal phrase: 'When you call me that,



*smile!*” This supremely cool challenge, which forces on Trampas the necessity of choosing either to draw his gun or back down, illustrates an important aspect of the western code: one must never shy away from violence, but at the same time never bring it on by one’s own actions. ‘Honour cannot be compromised, but the true hero, as opposed to a lawless man like Trampas, always lives within distinct moral limits’ (Cawelti, 222).

Wister ‘synthesized the almost unreconcilable paradoxes of lawless violence and the peaceful virtues of settled domesticity in a redemptive conclusion’.

The West is not simply a savage wilderness but a land where the inner spirit of men counts more than the surface manners and attitudes of civilization. In such a setting a man must prove his worth by action and not by any assumed or inherited status. It is interesting to note that while the American Western went on to become one of the most familiar and enduring genres in American culture, the bushranger story reached its apogee in the 1880s and declined thereafter. It did not have the simple polar white hat/black hat morality of the American western; its morality was far more ambiguous and slippery.

Bushranger stories formed the backbone of the nascent Australian movie industry in the early twentieth century. If *Robbery Under Arms* might be considered the precursor of the Western novel, then *The Story of the Kelly Gang* of 1906, the first feature-length movie in the world, might be considered to be the precursor of the Western movie.

Two movie adaptations of *Robbery Under Arms* were made in 1907, and a further movie, *Captain Starlight or Gentleman of the Road*, based on Boldrewood’s characters, was released in 1911.

William D. Routt identifies nineteen Australian bushranger movies produced between 1906 and 1912. They accounted for 30% of all movies produced in Australia in

that period, and were 'the single most significant component of the first five years of Australian feature production'.

In 1911 a ban on bushranger movies was imposed by the New South Wales Police, who were worried about the influence these movies would have on the population. Similar bans soon followed in Victoria and South Australia. Certainly the bushranger films were 'particularly notable because so many of its examples are so overtly anti-authoritarian, and that as a whole it is so unmistakably politicized' (Routt). At the same time, the ban confirmed what was even then an established and accepted middle-class prejudice: that young men are motivated by their exposure to representations of bushrangers to take up lives of crime.

The decision had a considerable impact on the local industry as it meant filmmakers could not work in a popular genre. Australian film production, which in 1911 was one of the highest in the world, went into decline. The ban was still in effect in the 1930s and hurt efforts to make a number of Australian movies, including a fourth adaptation of *Robbery Under Arms* from director Ken G. Hall.

Whereas in America the frontier was quite clearly in the West, and encroached further westward from the Mississippi to the Rockies, the frontier in Australia was the interior, away from the settled coastal regions. The American frontier offered riches in furs, fertile land, timber, minerals and herds of buffalo, but until the gold rushes the interior frontier of Australia offered diminishing returns: the land became less fertile and water became more scarce the further away you went from the civilized coast. There was little to drive pioneers inland, and those that sought the frontier were generally escaping the law of the city, into the alien and hostile landscape of the Australian interior.

Robert Pippin contrasts the American western with American *film noir*: the western presents us 'with questions about the possibility of law...in pre-law situations' whereas

*noir* addresses 'human life under conditions of corrupt or decaying or incompetent law, the post-law world of disillusionment'. The western is played out against a broad horizon, where the issue of destiny or fate 'is framed as a question of national historic destiny and is progressive and meliorist'. This contrasts with the claustrophobic interiors of *noir*, where the issue of destiny is 'largely framed in psychological or existential terms, and the relevant possibilities are severely constricted. The standard picture is of people 'trapped' either by themselves, or by an anonymous and autonomous social order or societal machine, or by a vast purposeless play of uncontrollable fortune and chance'. (Pippin, 23). By these definitions, the characters of *Robbery Under Arms* are inhabiting a constricted world which more greatly resembles *noir* than it does the open frontier freedom of the Western.

Australia's foundation as a penal colony ensured that there was never a 'pre-law situation'. Unlike America, which to use Abraham Lincoln's phrase, 'embalmed' freedom in the nation's founding documents as 'a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression', the law in Australia was imposed upon the colony by an external Imperial government, and when the colony gained enough autonomy to create its own laws and its own police force to enforce them, they were used as an 'instrument of terror.' Australia could therefore always be considered to have been in a 'post-law' state, where that law was incompetent and capricious.

It has been noted elsewhere in this exegesis that one of the elements in thirties American society that helped shape the hardboiled detective story was Prohibition, which forced a large number of otherwise law-abiding citizens to collaborate with organized crime under the eyes of often indulgent authorities. A correlation might be made between Prohibition and Australia in the 1850s. The prevailing anti-authoritarian attitude, created by the convict era, combined with rural poverty and an

incompetent police force using oppressive new laws, created conditions where a large number of the rural population sympathized with and actively assisted the bushrangers.

In this context, *Robbery Under Arms* looks far closer to Pippin's description of *noir* than it does to a western. The Marstons are indeed 'trapped' by their poverty and by a society that favours the squatter over the working man, and uses the police as an 'instrument of terror' to maintain control. Even when the Marstons are completely beyond the reach of the law, in hiding at the Hollow, the high rock walls of their hideaway are described in a way that feels claustrophobic, and the description of the abandoned bushman's hut (Chapter 22) highlights the sense of loneliness, exile and alienation. They are free, but the lawless frontier where they hide displays what Marcus Clarke called the '*weird melancholy*' of the Australian interior (Clarke, 4). They are in essence trapped between an inhospitable wilderness and a hostile civilization.

The Marstons can be considered as equivalent to Winfried Fluck's definition of the drifter character in film noir (Fluck, 21). Their narrative journey follows the typical 'everyman' noir plot as described by author Dave Zeltserman:

*Have your noir protagonist cross a moral line where there's no turning back from [...] Keep putting your hero in increasingly more dire situations that he is barely able to escape from, and repeat this until the tension becomes unbearable. Give your noir hero a thin ray of hope of escaping his situation [...] Just as it looks like he might escape his doom, pull the rug out from under your noir hero's feet and send him tumbling into the abyss.*

The Marston's believe that they are escaping to Queensland, and reach the border at the river, but there they are betrayed and ambushed by the police.

Throughout the novel the Marston's live in a world of structured paranoia. They are surrounded by adversaries and cannot trust the police, the justice system, Moran and

his gang, or even their own associates. In the end the police do not track them down, there is still zero detection: Starlight and the brothers are betrayed by Warrigal and Kate Morrison.

Self-knowledge is only gained at the moment of self-destruction, which for Dick Marston is the final gunfight with the police, and his incarceration. Only then, in prison and awaiting the gallows, does Dick Marston reflect on his life and write his story, in what might be considered a literary equivalent of a *film noir* voice-over and flashback.

The Marstons are currency, and Starlight is sterling. Together they illustrate both sides of Judith Wright's concept of Australia's dual aspect. Starlight represents the sense of exile, an Englishman who becomes a bushranger but then takes great pleasure in masquerading as a gentleman, while the Marstons represent the aspect of freedom, one that rejects the structures of the old country, and the colonial hangovers of the convict era and vested authority, and in 1880 were looking forward to the turn of the twentieth century, and the birth of a new nation.

## **Chapter 4: The Forger's wife by John Lang**

John Lang is acknowledged as the first Australian-born novelist (Knight, 1997, 18). He was born in Sydney in 1816, and was the grandson of John Harris, a First Fleet convict who in 1789 petitioned Judge Advocate Collins to set up the first Night Watch in Sydney to maintain law and order in the town, the marines who had arrived with the First Fleet being either unwilling, unable or too corrupt to check the lawlessness (Keesing, 2). Harris was a member of the fledgling police force, as well as farming on an allocation of land he was granted in Parramatta, and running a tavern through which he supplied sly grog and traded in stolen livestock and valuables. In 1801 Governor King offered Harris a senior appointment in the police force despite his illegal activities, but when Harris declined King turned against him, rescinded his land grants and smashed his kegs of sly grog. Harris left for England, never to return, and left his daughters and his grandchildren in Sydney under the care of James Lara, another former convict policeman, wealthy businessman and sly grog seller, later a prominent Emancipist.

Lara's wealth allowed John Lang to be well schooled in Sydney and to travel back to England to attend Cambridge University. Lang had a reputation at Cambridge for drunken and caddish behaviour, and was sent down for publishing satirical poems in Latin that were considered blasphemous. He was admitted to the Bar in London and travelled back to Sydney in 1841 where he was admitted as a barrister to the High Court. He tried to establish a political career as an Emancipist and was a close friend of William Wentworth. Lang ineptly opposed representative government in a public speech in February 1842, speaking directly after Wentworth (Earnshaw). That same month he was embarrassed in a separate legal scandal where he again penned contentious and ill-judged letters to the press. These scandals made it hard for him to

find legal work and so he left Australia, never to return, and established a successful legal career in India.

In India he became proprietor and editor of a newspaper, the *Mofussilite*, and at that time began to write fiction and used the newspaper to publish his early stories. He spent much of the 1850s in London, mixing in the same literary circles as Dickens, and published nine novels, including *The Forger's Wife* in 1855. Lang had twenty-four stories published in Dicken's *Household Words* magazine in the 1850s, eight of which were later included in his collection *Botany Bay* published in 1859.

He returned to India in 1861, and died there in 1864. (Earnshaw)

The eponymous protagonist of *The Forger's Wife*, Emily Orford, is a genteel young lady from a good English family of considerable fortune. When she comes of age she is not short of eligible suitors who propose marriage, but she rejects them all and is seduced by a rakish charmer who calls himself Captain Reginald Harcourt. He persuades her to elope with him to Gretna and get married.

Soon after their marriage Harcourt is arrested under the name Charles Roberts, for forging a bank deed for \$7850, and is sentenced to be transported to New South Wales. Emily is convinced he has been wrongly accused, and so books passage to Australia to find her husband.

She is befriended in Sydney by two men: George Flower, a police runner and thief-taker, and Mr Brade, a police magistrate. Both men are smitten with Emily, and offer their services as her protector, although Brade's motives are far from honourable. Flower finds Roberts and has him assigned as a convict servant to his wife, and also finds him work as a scribe to a lawyer, for which Flower pockets the salary. Before returning Roberts to his wife, he shaves his head, punishes him on the treadmill, and threatens him with further torment if he is not a loyal and obedient servant to his wife.

Despite Flower's threats, Roberts continues to commit petty frauds and scandals, to which his naïve wife seems continually oblivious. Roberts encourages Brade's interest in his wife, believing that if he allows Brade to seduce her, the magistrate might grant him a pardon. Flower becomes aware of the planned ruin of Emily and intervenes, using his influence to have the scandal brought to light and Brade dismissed as a magistrate and made destitute.

Flower tries repeatedly to persuade Emily to leave her scoundrel husband but she still protests that her 'dear Reginald' is innocent and refuses to leave the colony or return to England while he is alive.

Roberts is again arrested for forgery but uses counterfeit banknotes to bribe the constable guarding him and escape into the bush. He falls in with a gang of bushrangers and soon has a large bounty on his head.

Flower travels to the bush and assembles a team of armed men supplied and provisioned by local landowners. He pursues and kills Roberts and several of his gang.

Emily finally acknowledges that her husband was a rogue and agrees to return to England with Flower, who by this time has become the most prosperous man in New South Wales. Flower's hopes of marrying Emily are however thwarted when her father confesses that Flower is his illegitimate son.

Emily's reputation is saved when she accepts a proposal of marriage from one of the wealthy suitors of good family she had rejected in her youth, and Flower returns to Sydney to live out his life, wealthy, respected and feared.

The character of thief-taker and police runner George Flower was based on one of Sydney's best known identities when Lang was a schoolboy: the policeman Israel Chapman.

Chapman had been convicted of highway robbery in 1817 and transported to New South Wales. By 1827 he had secured a unique position as a police runner, based on the



model of the Bow Street Runners of London, who were, in effect, detectives. (Keesing, 84) Chapman effectively had an open brief to apprehend bushrangers and absconders, and supplemented his salary with rewards and bounty money. He was known as the 'George Street Runner' because he was attached to George street police station, and also called 'The Hebrew Dreamer' because he would protect the identities of his network of paid informants by claiming in court that useful information came to him in dreams.

He was a short, powerful man with a ruddy complexion, and a propensity to extreme violence when apprehending felons, and had a photographic memory for faces and great skill at disguising himself.

Keesing proposes that Mr. Brade was based on Ernest Augustus Slade, a police magistrate notorious for his zeal with flogging. Slade became embroiled in a scandal in 1834 when he asked a certain Lieutenant Samson Marshall, captain of a ship recently arrived in Sydney with 247 female emigrants, whether Marshall could find a suitable young woman of good virtue to be employed as a seamstress in Slade's household. Marshall proposed Lavinia Winter, a sixteen year-old girl who had been placed in his charge. However when Marshall discovered that Slade lived in a small unfurnished house, and that Winter would have to share a bedroom with Slade and his common-law wife and illegitimate baby, he petitioned Governor Bourke to save the girl from Slade's immoral motives. In the ensuing scandal Slade lost his job as magistrate and was ruined.

Knight proposes that *The Forger's Wife* is 'in many ways the finest of the first wave of Australian crime fiction' and nominates Lang as the 'first creator of a detective sub-genre in Australia' (Knight, 1997, 112). He praises the novel's 'salty moralism' and suggests that it reads today like a 'level-headed, wryly realistic form of crime fiction' compared to the romantic bushranger stories of later fiction that were attempting to euphemize a noble myth of national character.

The novel has two distinct story strands, which differ strongly in style and content. On one hand there is the class-conscious tale of Emily Orford, a woman whose beauty, virtue and breathtaking naivety and stupidity are so implausible as to be anything but satirical. Her qualities are such that three men are caught in the gravitational pull of her inexplicable charm, orbiting around her and scheming to win her affections with dubious morals and motives.

In parallel to this rather turgid tale is the story of George Flower and his adventures as a police runner and thief taker. These elements are engagingly and candidly written, with a fine ear for currency dialogue and a recurring sense of fatalism.

Flower was a convict himself, transported for '*discharging, in cold blood, the contents of a double-barrelled gun into the body of a young squire who had seduced his sister*' (p. 34). He shows no remorse for this murder: '*It was not a crime, or I should have repented of it before now, instead of glorying in it, as I did and do.*' (p. 40)

Flower is 'quick-witted, tough, moralistic and not above pleasing himself in both violence and finance...his powers include a benevolent re-direction of a distinctly criminal potential' (Knight, 1997, 20).

His first act of kindness towards Emily is when her writing desk is stolen. Flower immediately apprehends the culprit and beats him until he gives up the name of the fence. Flower then breaks into the fence's house in the middle of the night to retrieve the desk, but keeps for himself the fifty pound note he finds inside it.

When Brade wishes to get Flower out of the way so that he can get a clear run at seducing Emily, he presents Flower with the opportunity of hunting down three bushrangers at large in the mountains, with a reward of one hundred pounds for each. When Flower declines, Brade appeals to his vanity, saying that perhaps Flower fears that the bushrangers are more than a match for him. Flower replies that the only person who is a match for him is the devil himself, and accepts the commission.

Disguised as an escaped convict, Flower falls in with the three bushrangers: Millighan, Drohne and Slobhe, impressing them with his stories of escape and his bush skills. He commits highway robbery with the bushrangers, including a theft where they dress in the uniforms of mounted police they have killed in an earlier gunfight. Soon Flower is accepted into the gang, and *'rather enjoyed the life, and had grown to like the captain of the gang.'*

Flower asks Millighan to walk with him to the top of a mountain and there he talks with Millighan for some time

*'on the grandeur of the scene, and the sweets of liberty. It was a beautiful warm day, and not a cloud to be seen in the sky. The foot of man had never before trod the ground on which they were then standing. The stillness amidst the huge rocks of limestone conveyed an idea of something awful. The place was uninhabited, even by the birds of the air or the beasts of the field.'* (page 87)

Amidst this 'weird melancholy' of the Australian landscape, Flower tells Millighan of his true identity and that rather than shoot him down like a dog, he respects Millighan's bravery and generosity enough to challenge him face-to-face. He proposes they fight a duel with carbines at fifty paces.

Millighan begs of Flower that if he should die, his body should be left to rot in the bush rather than be buried, and Flower agrees and asks the same courtesy.

Flower says to Millighan: *'Don't let us talk much, or I may forget my mission, and become a bushranger myself.'* They step out their paces, turn and fire.

Millighan's bullet scrapes Flower's whiskers, while Flower's bullet strikes the bushranger in the chest, killing him instantly. Flower leaves his body where it has fallen in the bush, rather than take his corpse back to Sydney to claim the reward. He returns to the hideout and ambushes Drohne and Slobhe and captures them, handcuffing them together. Flower keeps for himself all the gold and jewelry that the

gang has hoarded. When Drohne tells him that he would prefer to die right then and there rather than be taken back to Sydney to hang, Flower casually shoots him through the heart and sets off back to Sydney with his captives, Drohne's corpse still manacled to Slobhe.

Years later, after the battle with Roberts and his gang of bushrangers, '*with human blood recently shed upon his hands and clothes*', Flower retraces his steps to the mountain where he had killed Millighan, and finds the bushranger's skeleton. '*The awful stillness of the place had struck Flower when he was there talking to Millighan, but now it was even more striking, more awful.*' Flower sits beside the skeleton until night falls, '*speculating as more educated philosophers had done before him, upon matters we have no inclination to discuss.*' (p. 116)

Australia's first detective shows the moral ambiguity that characterizes much Australian crime fiction. Flower is an authentic personality, driven by his own concepts of morality with little care for outside opinion. He sees bravery in the bushranger and cowardice and corruption in the police magistrate, but destroys both with the same cool hand. He dispatches fatal justice without feeling need of the law or the courts to justify his actions, and then has no compunction about stealing from the villains to further his own business interests. '*By fair means or by foul, there was nothing, seemingly, that (he) could not do. In the police office he exercised supreme power, albeit he was in a subordinate position*' (p. 42). In many ways he is the very model of a hard-boiled protagonist, and a precursor of Hammett's Continental Op.

Although employed by the police, he sees himself as apart from them and not bound by any ideas of duty or morality. Not only will he steal when an opportunity presents itself, but he will avoid involving the police at all. He prefers to work alone to maximize his profit from rewards. He sees no need for the police at all, and prefers that citizens

co-operate to protect themselves. When he forms his band of armed vigilantes he tells the assembled landowners:

*'Gov'ment's a fool for going to the expense of mounted police...I wish to teach you settlers, and the Gov'ment, and the bushrangers, a great moral lesson. I want to make you more independent, bushrangers less numerous and daring, and Gov'ment more economical and sensible'. (p. 113)*

When he sits in the alienating landscape contemplating his own mortality, and the fact that his own fate is only separated from that of the bushranger by a whisker, both literally and figuratively, he displays the fatalism characteristic of *noir* fiction.

Flower is almost a personification of Nietzsche's rationalization of cruelty: telling the settlers that the social order has broken down, that the government is powerless and should remain so, and that they should ignore any ethical impulses and resort to violence.

Winfried Fluck's suggests that there are three basic types of *film noir*, based on their protagonist. In the case of *The Forger's Wife* Lang has three central characters, all with different forms of guilt, and each is a clear representation of each of Fluck's types. Flower is clearly the investigator, a precursor of the hardboiled detective. Brade is the bourgeois, ostensibly an ordinary upstanding citizen, but slipping into crime, pushed by his baser instincts. Roberts is the drifter type, moving aimlessly from one crime to another seemingly without any agency (Fluck, 5).

Keesing believes that *The Forger's Wife* began as a sensational novelette, and suggests it shows evidence of being a deliberate parody of the novelette genre. But then, during its writing, 'George Flower assumed so much force that the work transcended its author's intention and developed into a worthwhile book of enduring quality and interest.' (Keesing, 100). She regrets that it was limited by its novelette format, and if

Lang had 'mustered enough nerve to work up *The Forger's Wife* to its potential importance' it could have had a greater influence on the course of the Australian novel.

Given that *The Forger's Wife* was published in 1855, at a time where he was regularly submitting short stories of Australian convict life in Dicken's *Household Words*, it is interesting to note the parallels between the characters of George Flower and Abel Magwitch in *Great Expectations*, published in 1861, and to consider whether Lang's work had been an influence on Dickens. This hypothesis is worthy of further study, but is outside the scope of this exegesis.

Keesing notes that Lang 'pondered crime and punishment; justice and injustice; and those accidents of birth and social position which allowed privileged men and women to prosper from actions that would earn five hundred lashes, or worse punishment, for an ordinary felon' (Keesing, 29). Lang had seen members of his own family brought into disrepute for such actions, and had seen his own difficulties in society because he was a 'scion of criminal origin' with emancipist connections and a satirical tongue. His writing disclosed his 'preoccupation with the thin line that divides virtue from vice: exclusive from emancipist; felon from free man; in him it rankled that the placement of the dividing line so often depended on who was found out and who was clever or lucky enough to escape retribution.' (Keesing, 40)

This is a very *noir* view on life; that morals are relative and that retribution is arbitrary and a matter of chance.

## Chapter 5: Mark Brown's wife by Charles de Boos

Charles De Boos was born in London in 1819. He served in the British Legion during the Carlist War in Spain in 1835, and emigrated to Australia in 1839. He took up land on the Hunter River. Unsuccessful on the land, he became a journalist first on the *Monitor*, then the *Sydney Gazette*. In 1851 he went to Melbourne and was commissioned by the *Argus* to report on the Victorian goldfields. He spent five months at Ballarat, Forest Creek and Bendigo, and in 1853 went to The Ovens on a similar mission. In 1854 he became a shorthand writer in the Victorian Legislative Council. In 1856 de Boos returned to Sydney and joined the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In the first parliamentary recess he visited the New South Wales goldfields and as the *Herald's* special correspondent later reported on all the newly-discovered fields.

De Boos's evidence before the 1870 Royal Commission on the goldfields led to his appointment in January 1875 as mining warden of the Southern Tumut and Adelong mining districts, and in May as a magistrate. In December 1879 he became warden for the Lachlan and in August 1880 for the Hunter and Macleay mining districts; he was also appointed police magistrate and coroner at Copeland. (Voll)

The knowledge he acquired of mining, its laws, and the needs of miners was later to benefit him in his fiction writing, particularly in *Mark Brown's Wife*.

The novel is told from the viewpoint of Tom Drewe, a digger on the Victorian goldfields in 1854. Sometimes Drewe acts as narrator, telling the story of Mark Brown and his wife, Cicely, and sometimes the story is told in journalistic reportage.

Drewe first meets Brown and his wife in Canvastown, a squatter camp for gold rush arrivals outside Melbourne. They are 'new chums' freshly arrived in the colony, and are quickly picked out as fresh meat by the thugs that rule the shanty town. Brown's beautiful wife attracts the attention of the leading thug, Ruggy Dick, who insults her,

then tries to pull her away from her husband. Brown strikes him and in the ensuing fight knocks Dick to the ground, humiliating him in front of his mates. Ruggy Dick swears that he will kill Brown and take his wife.

Brown joins Drewe on the goldfields, leaving his wife in Melbourne. They strike gold but one of their company, Job Hicks, is murdered when Ruggy Dick and his gang, having following them to the goldfields, attempt to rob him. Drewe's investigations lead him to the culprits. Ruggy Dick and one of his gang are arrested for murder. The accomplice hangs but there is not enough evidence to convict Ruggy Dick. He is acquitted and he takes to the bush.

Brown decides it is time for his wife to join him and so Drewe goes to Melbourne to find her. She had found work as a servant to a rich household. She received false rumours, started by Ruggy Dick, that her husband had been killed in a mining accident, and fearing destitution became her employer's mistress. Drewe finds her and tells her that Brown is still alive but she does not believe he will still love her now that she is a fallen woman. Drewe travels back to the goldfields to tell Brown, who immediately sets out for Melbourne.

On the road Brown is waylaid by Ruggy Dick and his gang, who have become bushrangers. Recognizing Brown, Dick has his revenge: he beats him savagely and then shoots him. He leaves him to die a tortuous death: naked on top of an ants' nest, but Brown dies from his wounds before the ants can torment him.

Drewe returns to Melbourne to search for Cicely again. When he finds her after several months she has fallen into prostitution and taken up with a regular client. Drewe follows her and discovers the client is Ruggy Dick. Once Ruggy Dick is discovered he strangles Cicely and disappears again into the bush.

Drewe vows to find Ruggy Dick and kill him, and moves from one gold rush to the next until he finds Ruggy Dick and his gang. Backed by a band of diggers, Drewe



captures Dick and is preparing to lynch him when the police arrive and take Ruggy Dick into custody. They again release him due to lack of evidence, so Drewe and his band surround Dick's camp, but their quarry escapes the ambush and Drewe pursues him on foot. Running through the diggings at night, Ruggy Dick falls down an abandoned shaft and breaks his back. The diggers rescue him from the shaft and watch as Ruggy Dick dies in agony.

*Mark Brown's Wife* stands as a sharp contrast to *Robbery Under Arms* and *Irralie's Bushranger*. Where Boldrewood and Hornung were influenced by English adventure fiction and gothic romance, de Boos writes with a journalistic simplicity and an ear for vernacular dialogue that brings to mind Raymond Chandler's comment that 'all the clever-clever darlings with the fluty voices' should go to hell, or 'go back to school and stay there until they can make a story come alive with nothing but dialogue and concrete description' (McShane, 123).

De Boos has no romantic view of bushranging or moral ambiguity with regard to Drewe, Brown or Ruggy Dick. They are all three violent and vengeful in a 'world of ferocious and entirely indigenous violence' (Knight, 1997, 36).

Like Boldrewood, de Boos was a police magistrate and yet chose to depict the system of law and order at that time as corrupt and inept. He notes that '*the Commissioner had no knowledge of law beyond the Mining Regulations*' (p. 47) and continually comments that the police's main role is to harass the diggers regarding mining permits.

Ruggy Dick is a career criminal, thug, robber, fraud and murderer without any sense of the noble myth of Captain Starlight or Stingaree, and no notion that he might contribute to the invention of Australian manhood. He steals gold and paydirt from the diggers; commits mail fraud to steal remittances and bank orders sent from the

diggings to Melbourne; commits highway robbery against miners and farmers alike; and throughout the whole book is committed to killing Drewe, Brown and his wife.

Tom Drewe acts as detective to solve the murder of his mate Job Hicks, tracking the footprints of a limping man; finding a scrap of cloth caught in the teeth of Job's dog; and then using the dog to track the culprit's scent. But he does not share his investigation with the police because *'such a clue...would be useless in the hands of the men to whom the police duties were then entrusted, and who thought that they best performed those duties by hunting up license fees.'* (p. 28)

He only involves the police when he has identified Ruggy Dick as the murderer, and they soon release him and hang the accomplice. *'There was a very free and easy way of doing things in those days; and the arrest of a man more or less was nothing of any consequence.'* (p. 45)

The diggers know that it is better to take matters into their own hands. When the murder is made known *'so great was the ferment amongst the diggers...that they went out in bands destroying the huts of all who were thought to be of doubtful character...They even went so far as to debate amongst themselves the propriety of lynching one or two of these individuals as a caution to the rest.'* (p. 28)

There is no doubt that Tom Drewe intends to take violent revenge on Ruggy Dick, but the police do not care, and in fact several constables who are former colleagues of Drewe's help him in his search.

After the police allow Ruggy Dick to go free on two occasions, Drewe and the diggers take the law into their own hands, as in *The Forger's Wife* when George Flower assembles his gang of armed vigilantes to pursue the bushranger Roberts.

When Drewe raises his group of vigilante diggers to hunt Ruggy Dick he tells them: *'we don't want no police or court work – them duffers of police would only let him slip*

*through their fingers as they've done before. You know what he's done and what he deserves.'* (p. 109)

When they capture him, Ruggy Dick thinks he can evade them by one of *'the paltry subterfuges which too often shelter offenders in a court of law.'*

*'It ain't a police business?'* asked Ruggy, surlily.

*'Not in the least'* retorted Steve; *'we don't want to have them busy bodies meddling in the matter at all...We're going to introduce you to Judge Lynch!'* (p. 113)

They hold a kangaroo court, with one of the diggers wearing a red blanket as a pretend judge's robe, and they give Ruggy Dick a 'fair trial' before sentencing him to death. They have the noose around his neck and tied to the windlass above a disused mine shaft, and are ready to give him the drop when the police arrive.

De Boos attempts to make no link between the morality of the protagonists and their fate besides the vagaries of chance. Ruggy Dick is portrayed as pure evil, with no help of redemption. His 'revenge' on Mark Brown, repaying his embarrassment in Canvastown, is to ruin his wife and deliver him a slow death. As Brown dies Ruggy Dick torments him by boasting that he had told Cicely that her husband had died in an accident. After killing Job Hicks and Mark Brown, Ruggy strangles Cicely Brown with these words:

*'Then die! ...you know me now – you know Ruggy, and what he vowed. You are the third, and there remains but one other for me to deal with. I have seen their dying agonies and watched their departing life as I now watch yours, and I shall watch his also.'* (p. 105)

However, after the alienating Australian landscape appears to have passed judgment on Ruggy Dick and smashed his body down the abandoned shaft, the diggers soon understand what has happened: *'the robber of washdirt was, to these rough though tender-hearted men, no longer a thief – he was a fellow creature in distress, perhaps*

*in the agonies of death*', and they work together to bring Ruggy Dick to the surface and give him succour as they would any of their mates.

The only morality that exists in the book is this concept of mateship, but here it is shown as a matter of survival: one group of mates protecting each other against robbery, murder, and the physical dangers of mining.

The goldfields and Canvastown are portrayed as a world apart from Melbourne, populated by recently arrived migrants and subject to its own rough justice. The diggers are continually portrayed as a separate breed, recognizable by their speech and dress. The goldfields are seen as unique, and de Boos makes no comparison between the colonies and the old country. There is no comment on the British class system, or that the diggers are in exile either forcibly or by choice. The goldfields are only shown as a place of opportunity, even if that opportunity is continually under threat from venality and greed. Although the diggers are seen to hit gold and 'make a pile', they are seen as profligate: spending it all in a 'spree' in Melbourne, drinking and gambling and consorting with the type of women whose fate it is Cecily Brown's to become. In many ways this lawless world of greed, corruption and base human instincts, where men gang together to either exploit the weak or to protect themselves from those that would do so, is similar to the American period of prohibition that spawned hard-boiled fiction.

Mark Brown is described by his friend Tom Drewe as being '*as good a man and as true a mate as ever struck pick into ground*'. But hard work and mateship seem to be his only virtues. He travels to the goldfields and leaves his wife to her own devices, unaware that Ruggy Dick is intercepting his mail and stealing the money he sends his wife, leaving her desperate. When he finally fears for her welfare it is Tom Drewe that travels to find her, confident in his own powers of investigation. Only when Mark Brown learns that she has been taken as another man's mistress and has a child does he rush to find her, only to run into Ruggy Dick.

Cicely Brown, despite being identified in the title of the book as the central character, is passive and usually off-stage. She serves to create conflict between Ruggy, Mark Brown and Tom Drewe, but is then abandoned to her fate. De Boos describes her fall with chapter titles such as ‘The Downward Path’, ‘An Old Story’ and ‘The Wages of Sin’. She is described as delicate and beautiful, with a voice like music, and much like *The Forger’s Wife* she incites men to despicable acts, but Cicely is shown as powerless. After being left alone in Melbourne as a servant she becomes her employer’s mistress, has a child who she seems to lose without much care, is arrested as a vagrant and a drunk, and then in the lock-up falls in with a prostitute. Cicely seems to do nothing to propel her downfall, except to blindly and naively step into the path of people who will ruin her.

Both *The Forger’s Wife* and *Mark Brown’s Wife* have a central female character who lacks agency. This issue deserves further study and commentary, but it is outside the scope of this exegesis.

Tom Drewe is the only character to have any agency. He is shown to be resourceful and smart, however he can do nothing to prevent the deaths of Job Hicks, Mark Brown or Cicely Brown. He is single-minded in his desire for revenge on Ruggy Dick, with the only difference being that his blood lust is justified by his belief in mateship and is shared by the other diggers who think they are taking justice into their own hands.

But Tom Drewe does not get any reward for his endeavours. Although the diggings are portrayed as offering prosperity and new beginnings, nobody in the novel is shown to profit by it. He finds gold but then loses it by investing in new gold claims that turn out to be ‘duffers’. In the final paragraph of the book de Boos tells us that Tom Drewe has lost his ‘pile’ and is once more ‘dead on the gutter.’

All four protagonists seem close to the loser-drifter character type identified as a staple of *noir* fiction, although Drewe might be considered to be an investigator,

although an amateur who falls squarely within Knight's definition of zero-detection. The novel certainly portrays a society based on the rationalization of cruelty. Canvastown and the diggings are a microcosm within even the lawlessness of colonial Victoria. The characters act on their basest primal energies, and give no thought to the police or the law, except where they can be used to achieve their own ends.

In the penultimate chapter, titled 'Retribution' and in which Ruggy Dick's end is told, de Boos steps out of his journalistic style and reveals his voice as author by clearly setting out the polemic of his novel:

*'That which many call Chance plays a much more important part in the affairs of human life than men are ordinarily willing to give it credit for doing....It seems absurd – but by such small means does the Almighty Ruler guide the destinies of man.'* (p, 129)

It is revealing that de Boos should choose to use the word 'absurd', since this clearly foreshadows the concept of absurdity defined by the existentialists in the twentieth century.

Lehan has pointed out that Albert Camus was influenced by the *noir* writing of James M. Cain when he wrote *L'Étranger*, and compares that novel with neo-realist writers such as Hemingway. However Camus's belief in a 'world of accident, of complete gratuity, where things happen arbitrarily,' seems as relevant to the relentless nihilism of *Mark Brown's Wife*, written seventy years before *L'Étranger*, as it does to American *noir*. The goldfields of 1850 were also a 'world completely indifferent to man's hopes and fears and suffering. Man tries to impose meaning on the world, but reason only takes him part way toward any total explanation, and at the point at which reason breaks down "absurdity" begins.' (Lehan, 233)

## Chapter 6: *Irralie's Bushranger* by E.W. Hornung

Ernest William Hornung (1866-1921) was born in 1866 in Yorkshire, youngest of eight children of Hungarian-born John Peter Hornung, iron and coal merchant. Throughout his life he was known to family and friends as 'Willie'. Hornung was asthmatic, and in December 1883, before he had finished school, he moved to Australia for his health. He became tutor to the large family of Cecil Joseph Parsons, owner of Mossiel station in western New South Wales, and he travelled throughout the Riverina.

In addition to teaching, he spent time working in remote sheep stations in the outback and contributing material to the weekly magazine *The Bulletin*; he also began writing what was to become his first novel. Although he spent only three years in Australia, the experience was 'the making of him and ... the making of his career as a writer' (Rowland). Hornung 'seems to have regarded this period as one of the most satisfying of his life' (Valentine).

Hornung returned to England in February 1886 when his father's business and health were both in jeopardy. He worked as a journalist and began writing stories and novels, several with Australian settings. In 1893 in London he married Constance Aimée Monica, sister of his friend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

*Irralie's Bushranger* was Hornung's fifth novel, published in 1896. The previous four novels all made use of his Australian experiences, and were all considered to be comedies of manners, using the repeated device of a blunt Australian character entering English society to show up English class consciousness.

Two years after the publication of *Irralie's Bushranger* Hornung published the first of his Raffles stories. Raffles, an English gentleman fallen on hard times who maintains his expensive lifestyle in London by stealing jewellery from the aristocracy, was

immensely popular at the end of the nineteenth century, his stories as successful as those of Sherlock Holmes. Hornung published two volumes of short stories about Raffles before returning to his bushranger with the collection of short stories published as *Stingaree* in 1906.

The novel is centred on the character of Irralie Villiers, who is the only daughter of the manager of Arran Downs, a sheep station in the Riverina. While driving home to the station in her horse buggy she comes across a tall ragged man, dressed like a common stockman. His horse has collapsed from lack of water. Irralie sees a revolver poking from the pocket of his tattered coat. The stranger says he carries a gun because of reports that the renowned bushranger Stingaree has been spotted in the neighbourhood. She offers to take him and his horse to her home.

The stranger tells her he is the Honourable Grenville Fullarton, the son of an English Earl, and has arrived to take ownership of Arran Downs.

The stranger is introduced to the household and despite his ragged appearance manages to win them over with his charm. Irralie is also taken with the stranger, and is soon walking with him in the moonlight and bonding over their mutual love of music. She is however starting to suspect that the stranger might not be who he claims, and other members of the household are suspicious of the stranger. Irralie begins to think that he may be the bushranger.

The whole neighbourhood gathers at the station to dine and dance and welcome the new owner. The ladies dress to impress the English gentleman and wear their finest jewellery. A commotion breaks out at the homestead and all the men come rushing outside to seize the stranger and accuse him of being Stingaree. On the veranda stands a dapper Englishman in riding breeches with drooping whiskers and a monocle, and the station hands tell Irralie that this is the real Grenville Fullarton.



The stranger is beaten and locked in the iron-store with a guard. Irralie takes pity on him and helps him to escape. Returning home she meets the gentleman, who soon realizes the prisoner has escaped and that Irralie is his accomplice. He tells her he is in fact the bushranger Stingaree, and that he has just held up the party and stolen the ladies' jewellery. He makes Irralie accompany him at gunpoint as he chases the real Grenville Fullarton on horseback. He tells her that he had met Fullarton on the road and robbed him of his money and clothes.

They catch up with Fullarton at a whim-driver's hut where Stingaree's partner Howie waits for them. There is a struggle in which Howie is killed, and Fullarton picks up his fallen gun and captures Stingaree, rescuing Irralie.

In an epilogue the elderly Lord Fullarton travels some years later to Australia to visit his son, Grenville, his new wife, Irralie, and their son.

As Russel Ward convincingly demonstrates, by 1890 the stereotypes of Australian nationalism and bush literature were so consolidated that authors had started satirizing them. Since Australian nationalism had strong links to the union movement and egalitarianism, it was a direct rejection of Empire and of the English class system. This is clearly the case with *Irralie's Bushranger*. It was written in London twelve years after Hornung had left Australia, and ten years after Ned Kelly's hanging effectively ended the era of the bushranger.

*Irralie's Bushranger* is a novel that 'casts doubt on conventional responses' to a positive criminal character. (Knight, 1983) and displays the same moral ambiguity expressed by Boldrewood.

The mistaken identity between the English gentleman Grenville Fullarton and the bushranger Stingaree causes great confusion in the young woman Irralie. She is initially drawn to Fullarton when she thinks he is the gentleman who has come to take

possession of her home. The attraction becomes more romantic when she begins to suspect he may be an imposter and a bushranger, and is strong enough that she helps him to escape. However, when Fullarton and Stingaree are finally together in the whim-driver's hut, with Irralie the bushranger's prisoner, she compares the two men: '*Here the contrast was more remarkable in that both had good looks; yet the ready, energetic, strutting bantam of a man was not only a stronger figure than his heedless, indolent, hare-brained captive; he looked still, and in the teeth of all facts, the likelier gentleman of the two*' (p. 148). Here again the contrast is made: Fullarton representing the decadence of old Empire and Stingaree the vigour of the new colony. There is little moralizing over Stingaree's crimes. The theft of the jewels is barely alluded to; his greater crime appears to be his lack of manners towards Irralie and that he would threaten her life.

Irralie is attracted to Fullarton more when she mistakenly believes him to be a bushranger and '*the most attractive villain unhung*', the result of '*a certain large, unreasonable chivalry in herself, ever likely to create in her a wilful sympathy with the unorthodox and the ungodly; more probably, however, she was unaware of the growth in her heart of this particular weed of original wickedness.*' (p. 39)

As identities are revealed to her she is torn between her respect and deference for an English gentleman and her romantic attraction to the outlaw.

*Irralie's Bushranger* exhibits the same duality as shown in *Robbery Under Arms* and identified by Judith Wright, but this duality is foregrounded even more explicitly by the mistaken identities of the bushranger and the gentlemen, and the reactions of the native Australians to both men. Grenville Fullerton is an English gentleman in exile in Australia. In the final pages Grenville admits that when he had first arrived at Arran Downs he had not dared admit he had been robbed by the bushranger Stingaree. He understood that 'new chums', freshly arrived from England, were always likely to be

made fools of by the currency Australians: *'He felt his life wouldn't be worth living there if he arrived upon the scene with such an ignominious tale'*. (p. 161)

But a contrast is made when Grenville is later visited by his father. He has gone native: *'bearded to the chest but most altered by an extraordinary access of energy and enthusiasm'*. Grenville has married Irralie, the *'uncultivated'* girl he had *'picked up in the bush'* and who *'provoked a more apprehensive curiosity'* in the English Lord. (p. 158) Grenville has left behind the class judgements of England and embraced the freedom and egalitarianism of his new home, and displays the energy so admired by Irralie in the bushranger Stingaree. He has embodied both sides of Wright's duality: the Englishman in exile and the new start in a country of opportunity.

Stingaree also shows both sides of this duality. Little is told about him in *Irralie's Bushranger*, and his real name is never revealed, but later short stories by Hornung written after 1909, which develop the character, describe him as *'an Oxford man'* and his monocle and breeches became a permanent feature. He is therefore also an Englishman in exile who has created a new life in the colony, but in his instance his new life is as an outlaw.

*Irralie's Bushranger* falls into Knight's category of zero-detection. The police do not appear. When Fullarton is apprehended as a bushranger the imposter Stingaree issues orders that the police not be informed. He says he is wary of the station hands *'getting wind'* of there being a bushranger, since *'it is not at all an uncommon thing to find an ordinary pound-a-week hand ready on principle to back a bushranger for all he's worth.'* He also doesn't want anybody to *'make a scene.'* (p. 95) The others at the homestead are quite prepared to accept this assessment, because they too are wary of insurrection from the common stockmen, but also because of deference to the man they believe to be an English gentleman even though he is *'a little supercilious'* and *'bosses*

*us about perhaps a bit too much*'. Irralie's mother is said to have '*venerated rudeness*' in a gentleman. (p. 89)

This casual acceptance that the police might cause them embarrassment, and that the working man will support the bushranger, is a further illustration of Australian attitudes to the forces of law and order demonstrated in *Robbery Under Arms*.

With no intervention from the police, it is left to the people of Arran Downs to deal with the situation themselves. Stingaree and Howie are not brought down by the police, or even by Fullarton, but by a former confederate. Deaf Dawson, the old man employed at the station as a whim-driver, who had ridden with Stingaree some years previously, has a sudden change of allegiance when he overhears Stingaree say that he means to make Irralie 'pay for it'. He attacks Howie and dashes his brains out, and Fullarton grabs Howie's fallen gun and captures Stingaree. Previously Fullarton had been too indolent to act.

Hornung published *Irralie's Bushranger*, and created the character of Stingaree, in 1896. Also in 1896 he wrote a short story *After the Fact* about an Englishman called Bower, a public school type, who travels to Geelong at a time when several banks have been robbed by 'a second Ned Kelly.' He encounters an old schoolfellow, Deedes Major, for whom he used to fag at school. Deedes calls Bower by his school nickname: The Beetle. As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that Deedes Major is the bank robber, and as he is pursued by armed constables he takes his ex-girlfriend Enid and The Beetle captive. They end up cornered and Deedes is shot in a climactic shoot-out. Deedes dies in Enid's arms as she says: '*He is not fit to die. He has fine qualities. He could play a man's part yet in the world.*'

Stingaree and Deedes Major quickly developed into the character of Raffles, the gentleman jewel thief and 'amateur cracksman' of Piccadilly. The Beetle grew into Raffles former public-school fag and now sidekick, Bunny Manders. The first short

story was published in 1898 in *Cassell's Magazine*, and was a direct contemporary and rival to his brother-in-law's Holmes and Watson stories published in *The Strand*. The stories take a similar form, with Bunny acting as narrator to Raffles exploits. Further Raffles stories proved to be as popular in their day as Holmes and Watson, and Hornung's relationship with his brother-in-law could be fractious at times. When the first anthology of short stories was later published, Hornung generously paid tribute to his brother-in-law by dedicating the volume, *The Amateur Cracksman*, to him. The dedication read: 'To A.C.D., *This Form of Flattery*'. In his 1924 autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*, Doyle recognized himself as Hornung's inspiration, stating:

*'I think I may claim that his famous character Raffles was a kind of inversion of Sherlock Holmes, Bunny playing Watson. He admits as much in his kindly dedication. I think there are few finer examples of short-story writing in our language than these, though I confess I think they are rather dangerous in their suggestion. I told him so before he put pen to paper, and the result has, I fear, borne me out. You must not make the criminal a hero.'*

Contemporary reviews of the Raffles stories were also unsure about the morality of the tales. *The Spectator* wrote that 'stern moralists will hardly fail to reprobate as a new, ingenious, artistic, but most reprehensible application of the crude principles involved in the old-fashioned hero-worship of Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin'. A review of a later anthology stated that 'this sort of book presents crime in a form too entertaining and attractive to be moral'.

It is almost as if Hornung had been infected by the moral ambiguity present in Australian crime fiction during the time he spent there, and took that contagion back with him to London, where it spread. Raffles himself tells, in the story *Le Premier Pas*, how he was first introduced to crime in Australia, during a cricketing tour. Short of money, he seeks out a bank manager who shares his surname in the hope of using the

connection to secure financial help. In another case of mistaken identity, on arrival at the bank he is assumed to be the manager and once left alone in the bank Raffles decides to rob it. On returning to London and faced with similar hardship, Raffles again turns to robbery. Raffles and Bunny's 'moral questioning and nefarious excitement had a *fin de siècle* decadence' (Knight, 1983) and Hornung found kindred spirits in the aesthetic movement in London at the end of the nineteenth century.

Hornung was a contemporary of Oscar Wilde, and mixed in the same literary circles. When Hornung's son was born in 1895, he was christened Arthur Oscar, in honour of Conan Doyle and Wilde. Michael Jones suggests that Hornung, along with Wilde, Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson, helped create a 'romance masculinity' which countered the dominant Victorian ideas of physical manliness, chivalry and moral certitude common during the expansive phase of Empire. Romance masculinity was socially rebellious, anti-social and 'driven by the aesthetic experience of romance and danger' (Jones, 45). It created a rhetoric of individualism and personality, which seemed novel in late Victorian England but which had been the basis of the Australian Legend since settlement.

According to Wilde in his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* it was almost impossible to be a genuine personality without committing a 'sin against society'. 'Personality is a very mysterious thing. A man cannot always be estimated by what he does. He may keep the law, and yet be worthless. He may break the law, and yet be fine. He may be bad, without ever doing anything bad. He may commit a sin against society, and yet realize through that sin his true perfection.'

What Wilde calls personality, other writers such as Trilling call authenticity. In his essay *Sincerity and Authenticity* Trilling suggests that authenticity emerged out of the Romantic imagination and reached its fullest expression in modernism and existentialism. The authentic individual is true to his or her self, and is no longer

aligned with society, because the authentic self is perpetually alienated from the social realm. The problem of the inauthentic is a loss of selfhood, a false consciousness where the self is immersed and dissolved in the society of which it is part. The *noir* protagonist, who is a modernist development of the romantic heroes of Stingaree and Raffles, shares their alienation and their self-imposed exile from society in their search for authenticity.

Once again Australian crime fiction and its moral ambiguity might be seen to prefigure modernism and existentialism.

It is not clear whether Hornung shared Wilde's anarchist tendencies, because Hornung left no memoirs or journals, but Raffles does once justify himself by the casual remark that 'the distribution of property is all wrong anyway'.

Neither Raffles nor Stingaree appears to feel strongly that stealing is wrong in itself. Like Boldrewood's Captain Starlight, it is viewed more as sport, or even as an art. As Orwell suggests of Raffles, they 'think of themselves not as sinners but as renegades, or simply as outcasts.' As Raffles tells Bunny: 'we were in Society but not of it'.

Orwell compares the Raffles stories with *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, a very popular crime novel of 1939 by James Hadley Chase, who was English but wrote in American idiom in the style of James M. Cain. It concerns the kidnap and subsequent rape of an heiress by gangsters, and the investigation by police and a private investigator hired by the family.

Orwell notes that 'it takes for granted the most complete corruption and self-seeking as the norm of human behaviour. The detective, for instance, is almost as great a rogue as the gangsters, and actuated by nearly the same motives.'

Orwell states that by using Raffles as a background for examining thirties *noir* crime fiction he 'deliberately chose a book which by the standards of its time was morally equivocal.' He suggests that *noir* fiction is aimed at the power-instinct, and its moral

corruption and sadistic violence is a reflection of the power structures in play in the 1930's with the rise in all-powerful gangsters reflecting the rise in dictators such as Stalin, Mussolini, Franco and Hitler. Raffles came from a gentler time, but was still a reflection of the power structures of the time: the English class system and oligarchy at the height of Empire, and the rise of individualism and personality in contrast to class homogeneity and deference predominant during Empire.



## Chapter 7: 'Wanted by the Police' by Henry Lawson

The short story 'Wanted by the Police' was published in the collection of prose and poetry *The Rising of the Court* in 1910. It consists of three interconnected elements: a poem of eight lines; a first-person essay of some 1300 words; and a short story of 4,000 words.

The 'sketches in prose and poetry' that make up *The Rising of the Court* generally take on the themes of law and order, although none of them might be considered crime fiction, with the possible exception of 'Wanted by the Police'.

*You stodgy, solid citizen, so cocksure and content,  
Whose mansion's built on factory toil, and years of grinding rent—  
Your character's unblemished, and your conscience is at peace,  
But many a better man than you is known to the police.*

*You smug, right-thinking persons, who could sin not if you would,  
Without the strength or brains or heart to do wrong or do good;  
Who want things as they are, and take of life a lengthy lease—  
There's many a better man than you that's "Wanted by the P'lice".*

With this opening poem Lawson neatly encapsulates the issues central to the short story which follows: an issue which recurs throughout nineteenth century Australian literature which sees 'a contest between an exclusive and an inclusive culture, in which the latter has consistently marshaled the superior forces; it is the democratic theme which is at the heart of our literature' (Heseltine, 35).

Unlike the authors previously discussed in this exegesis, most especially Boldrewood, who had aspirations towards the squirocracy, and 'sticks up for the bosses, but hasn't the sound of a scab' (Phillips, 1958, 52), Lawson was born and raised in

Australia and in poverty, and spent most of his writing life skirting the edges of destitution. Lawson was at the forefront of a 'strikingly original school of writing... For the first time in centuries, Anglo-Saxon writing had broken out of the cage of the middle-class attitude.' (Phillips, 1958, 53)

Lawson was born in Grenfell in the Victorian goldfields, at the 'heart of the country of the bush barbarians. Where men and women had grown up in ignorance of the difference between good and evil, where the descendants of convicts nourished in their breasts the viper of undying resentment against the swell folks... and a savage elemental hatred against the hirelings of their oppressors – the police, the parsons, the magistrates and all the agents of law and order.' (Clark, 7). He was familiar with the '*weirdly melancholy and aggressively lonely Australian bush*' (Lawson, *The Hairy Man*).

As an adult he moved to the city and took a series of tradesmen's jobs. His politics were stridently socialist, and with his mother Louisa he edited the pro-federation newspaper *The Republican*. His mother Louisa Lawson went on to publish the feminist newspaper *The Dawn* for many years.

As a poet and writer of short stories, Lawson was politically and artistically affiliated with *The Bulletin*, which first published his work in 1887. Based in Sydney and highly influential, it remained at the forefront of Australian life and debate throughout the 1880s and '90s. *The Bulletin* baldly promoted egalitarianism, unionism, and nationalism. It took a republican stance and cautioned against too enthusiastic a support for British causes.

Tony Moore listed *The Bulletin's* Traits: 'mateship and blokey bonding to the exclusion of family life; hostility to religion, personified by the Protestant wowsler; ironic humour; a fondness for alcohol, pubs and gambling; pre-occupation with a free-wheeling Australian identity (overlaid with francophilia and Irish nationalism)

invariably opposed to a conservative Englishness; and an occasional flirtation with political causes such as socialism and republicanism.’

Lawson wrote regularly for *The Bulletin*, and was at the centre of a Bohemian group of writers linked to the magazine. Lawson was unique among them because, although most of them were lauding the Australian bushman as a symbol of growing nationalism, Lawson had actually grown up in the bush. His poems in *The Bulletin* ‘did so much to authenticate the labour movement in the eyes of the workers’ (Moore, 101). However it was not ‘merely a general fellow-feeling that made ‘Wanted by the Police’ distinct with sympathy for the fugitive. Lawson’s own sufferings aroused self-pity, but less than the pity he had for (his bother) Charles.’ (Roderick, 16)

Charles spent most of his early life in prison, serving several different sentences for horse stealing, burglary and firearms offences. Lawson himself spent time in jail in 1907 for non-payment of maintenance to his wife. He wrote of the experience in what became the titular sketch in *The Rising of the Court*, as well as in the poem *One Hundred and Three*, which referred to his prisoner number.

In 1897 Lawson had written a stage play, *Ruth*, whilst living in New Zealand. It was his first work as a playwright. It ran to over ten hours and was roundly rejected without being performed. ‘Out of it he was to extract the core of half a dozen short stories, among them... ‘Wanted by the Police.’ (Roderick, 190). So, although ‘Wanted by the Police’ was not published until 1910, it is likely that it was written much earlier, certainly prior to Federation. It is certainly of similar tenor to Paterson’s *Waltzing Matilda*, and forms a similar watershed.

On coming out of Beechworth Gaol Lawson was almost destitute, and risked further imprisonment. Angus & Robertson gave him money almost as charity, offering it as an advance on a collection of poems and prose as yet unseen. Lawson later presented them with a slender collection of works that were published as *The Rising of the Court*.

It is generally not regarded as his strongest work, however it encapsulates his opinions of law and order, and the inevitable way with which working class people were bound to clash with them. Lawson was ‘the man who had introduced into Australian literature the failures, the broken, the dissolute and the shiftless’ (Clark, 149).

If the verse were not explicit enough, Lawson feels it necessary to add some polemic before the short story, hammering home his central idea that the common people distrust the instruments of law and order:

*Yet, in our heart of hearts we are antagonistic to most of the laws, and to the Law as a whole (which we regard as an ass), and to the police magistrates and the judges. And we hate lawyers and loathe spies, pimps, and informers of all descriptions and the hangman with all our soul. For the Soul of Man says: Thou shalt not refuse refuge to the outcast, and thou shalt not betray the wanderer.*

In the story a family of small-holders in a remote hut give shelter and food to a pair of fugitives wanted for cattle and sheep theft. The elder of the thieves asks the family to guard his only possessions: his family bible and some letters from his mother. He says he is ‘*neither a religious man nor a hypocrite*’, but does not want to lose them if he is captured. The family helps the pair on their way and drive cattle along the trail to cover their tracks. When the police arrive, the family claims not to have seen the thieves.

Five years later the family receives a letter from the fugitive asking for the return of his bible. The letter contains fifty pounds as ample reimbursement for food and lodging.

Lawson is clear that his story is set ‘during the reign of the squatters in the nearer west’, at a time when the squatters came into conflict with small-holders and selectors. Uncle Abe, the elder of the family says, that ‘*the squatters has enough*,’ which implies that he does not consider crimes against squatter’s property to be crimes at all, but a simple redistribution of wealth.

At the end of the story, upon receipt of the money, Uncle Abe says: *'Cast yer coffee an' bread an' bacon upon the waters....'* This is a play upon the biblical verse Ecclesiastes 11:1-2, and along with reference to the thief's bible, implies that they believe that to shelter a fugitive from the police is a righteous act for which they have received due reward.

When the police question the family and imply that they are lying, Aunt Annie retorts: *'Now, look here...we're neither cattle duffers nor sympathizers; we're honest, hard-working people, and God knows we're glad enough to see a strange face when it comes to this lonely hole; and if you only want to insult us you'd better stop it at once.'* Despite deceiving the police and abetting criminals, she truly sees herself and her family as honest. 'Few writers believe so little in human wickedness (as Lawson and Furphy). It is not merely that they tossed aside the Victorian novelists' convention of the Villain. They simply do not seem to have believed that the human heart was capable of much evil. They knew that man could be foolish, obstinate, weak, egotistical, destructively insensitive; but they seem convinced that he had no enduring capacity for malevolence or ruthlessness, or for even a thoroughly determined rapacity. Belief in the pervasive influence of such forces was for them a form of that heroic gesturing which they rejected.' (Phillips, 1962, 177)

*'I did find a white spot on a squatter once. He lent me a quid when I was hard up. There's white spots on the blackest characters if you only drop prejudice and look close enough. I suppose even Jack the Ripper's character was speckled.'* (Lawson, Lord Douglas, 87)

This belief 'demanded that they should write in the passive voice. The human subject suffers the action he does not create it.' (Phillips, 178)

The two fugitives arriving at the family's hut are 'wringing wet and apparently knocked up, a tall man with black curly hair and beard, black eyes and eyebrows that made his face seem the whiter; dressed in tweed coat, too small for him and short at the sleeves, strapped riding-pants, leggings, and lace-up boots, all sodden. The other a mere boy, beardless or clean shaven, figure and face of a native, but lacking in something. Arms and legs of riders, both of them; cabbage-tree hats in left hands - as though the right ones had to be kept ready for something - pistol butts probably.'

Despite their menacing appearance, they are made welcome, given dry clothes and a place by the fire, and given food and gin from the medicine bottle.

'*That's a church-yarder!*' comments Uncle Abe at the younger thief's cough, implying that it will most likely be fatal.

There is a sense of fatalism and nihilism that pervades the story. Apart from the younger thief's possibly terminal illness, the elder thief says: 'I don't care about myself so much... for I'm tired of it, and—and—for the matter of that I'm tired of everything; but I'd like to see poor Jack right, and I'll try to get clear myself, for his sake.'

This 'contempt for the impressively ineffective translated itself into a re-action against the literature of the heroic gesture,' and the fugitives are portrayed as anything but heroic: they are simply showing the 'frontier-man's recognition of the malevolence of circumstance. They felt the hostility of the Universe to man... they saw man as the potential victim of Fate.' (Phillips, 177). Their reaction is 'the sigh of fatalistic resignation, the 'ah well' of so many of Lawson's stories.' (Mitchell, 69).

Lawson was always conscious of the role of fate. In his autobiography quoted by Desmond O'Grady, he said of his own life: 'There was hardship and poverty, squalor and misery, hatred and uncharitableness, and ignorance; there were many mistakes, but no one was to blame; it was fate – it was Fate.'

‘Lawson is one of our most melancholy writers, and to this melancholy his life is a testament. There is no personal note in his work that is not charged with hopelessness. The Lawson of popular image is already a broken and unhappy man... Lawson was deeply pessimistic about human nature and its fate...the battle was lost, and Lawson knew it, and his inherent pessimism kept him from hoping much for the future. (Wright, 84)

‘Wanted by the Police’ shares the tone that is so common in Lawson’s stories: ‘a vein of pessimism and resignation and acceptance of things as they are, even a shy love of things as they are, as if he were then ready to say and mean those words ‘... Thy will be done on earth’ (Clark, 86).

Lawson’s dual aspect as poor boy from the bush and a city bohemian gave him a unique perspective during the nineties. ‘Bohemia and socialism shared synergies as romantic ideas: a sense of alienation from capitalist society; a desire for freedom from the market; an enthusiasm to shock the bourgeois, especially that philistine fraction that owned and managed business; an oppositional, rebellious outlook, and a vanguardist belief that they were seers of the future.’ They shared a ‘forward-looking belief that a new national type created by the Australian environment could renew society.’ (Moore, 102)

Lawson’s view was that ‘socialism is just being mates.’ He used larrikin humour and earthy slang to prick pretension and demystify authority, and to ‘naturalize political aspirations such as community, solidarity, and the ‘fair go’ as characteristics of ordinary Australians.’ He contrasted the ‘Old Dead Tree’ of empire with the ‘Young Tree Green’ of the emerging nation. He was part of a younger generation who ‘saw themselves rebelling against an outdated and stale set of cultural standards’ (White, 87). Lawson’s stories, and those of other *Bulletin* writers, openly rejected the old values of the British cultural establishment, and gave organized labour ‘a counter-story of national interest

identified with youth, progress and native birth to compete with the imperial belonging of the colonial ruling class.’ (Moore, 105). ‘Irreverence provided the starting point for the new image of Australia that the *Bulletin* writers helped create. The general bohemianism, the scoffing at Victorian morality, the idealization of the ‘Common Man’, the commitment to naturalism, were all aspects of a common revolt against received literary values.’ (White, 92)

The new generation were attracted to ‘a cluster of symbols and principles which they associated with Australia: sunlight, wattle, the bush, the future, freedom, mateship and egalitarianism’ (White, 97). This, like other images of Australia, was essentially artificial. It did not spring, in full bloom, from the Australian soil, but rather grew out of a set of attitudes to which the new generation had attached themselves and which provided a reference point for their revolt.

Lawson saw Federation as an opportunity to throw off the strictures of Empire and create a new nation where freedom would be enshrined as it was in the American Constitution and the French Bill of Rights, but in Australia that new nation could be forged without revolution. If that opportunity were to be wasted then Australians would ‘curse themselves for sleeping when their rights could have been made invulnerable without bloodshed and without toil’ (Lawson, *Australian Loyalty*, 1887).



## **Chapter 8: Summary and Conclusion**

The first European settlers in Australia were disturbed by the topsy-turvy country in which they found themselves. Not only were the seasons inverted in the southern hemisphere, but the trees retained their leaves and shed their bark. Moral sensibilities among those first settlers were also inverted. The convict was already a punished sinner. The Pilgrim Fathers setting out for America saw themselves as the redeemed, whereas the first European Australians saw themselves as the damned (Keneally, 1993, 52).

Phillips has suggested that 'before the nineties there was no such thing as Australian writing, no continuous stream of creative work: there were only occasional books, standing like waterholes in a sandy bed of apathy. From the nineties, the creek has often run feebly, has never swelled to flood level, but has never run dry.' (Phillips, 1958, 52)

The authors discussed here were instrumental in creating a unique Australian writing, and they plot the 'inevitable stages in the passage of what was once a colonial culture to national independence and maturity' (Heseltine, 36).

Textual analysis of Boldrewood, Hornung, deBoos, Lang, and Lawson in this exegesis has shown that their work is linked by a moral ambivalence which signifies a divorce of the social order from any ethical impulses. It explains the Australian preference for 'zero-detection' in crime fiction, since colonial Australians had implicit distrust of all the instruments of law and order. This differed markedly from British and American crime fiction of the nineteenth century, which sought to clearly delineate between right and wrong, and portray a reassuring world in which those that try to disturb the established order were always discovered and punished. This was illustrated by the disgust with which Conan Doyle greeted Hornung's use of the criminal as hero in

his Stingaree and Raffles stories. If there has been a subsequent weakening in the sense of sin in British and American crime fiction during the twentieth century, it is worthy of further study to determine what influence the Australian fiction analyzed here may have had on the morality of British crime fiction: through Hornung via his relationship with Conan Doyle and the popularity of his Raffles stories, which had their genesis in Australia; and through Lang and his relationship with Charles Dickens.

Whereas the moral ambiguity in American and European crime fiction of the twentieth century is seen as post-modern, in Australian fiction it has been shown to pre-figure modernism and post-modernism, and to be a product of a unique history.

Heseltine contends that 'Australian literature is signalized by its early recognition of the nature of the social contract and by its long-standing awareness of the primal energies of mankind, an awareness which has known little of the sweetening and freshness of early Romantic optimism. Australia's literary heritage is based on a unique combination of glances into the pit and the erection of safety fences to prevent any toppling in.'

The fundamental concern of the Australian literature which grew from our national origins and the harsh conditions of settlement, is to 'acknowledge the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defenses against its dangers. It is that concern which gives Australia's literary heritage its special force and distinction, which guarantees its continuing modernity.' (Heseltine, 49)

That 'terror at the basis of being' has also been shown to manifest itself in elements of fatalism, cynicism, nihilism, and moral ambiguity that are generally associated with American *noir* fiction of the twentieth century, but were evident much earlier in Australian crime fiction of the second half of the nineteenth century. Those elements also appear in contemporary Australian crime fiction from the 1950s onwards. Knight suggests that Peter Corris's Cliff Hardy novels 'echo some central attitudes in the

goldfields mysteries of the 1860s' (Knight, 5). Further study might undertake a textual analysis of crime fiction from the 1950s onward to identify how much the themes developed in Australian crime fiction in the latter half of the nineteenth century are still reflected in modern Australian crime fiction. That study might investigate how the dissenter and anti-authoritarian aspects of Australian history and character have informed the moral ambiguity present in contemporary Australian crime fiction, and weigh that against the influence of genre fiction forms developed in American and British genre crime fiction of the twentieth century, especially *noir* fiction.

Seeley suggests that '*Noir* is...a vehicle of protest and deconstruction, a weapon against entrenched and invisible systems power and privilege, a haven for unheard, angry voices.'

In Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century those unheard, angry voices belonged to the working men and women of Australia, whether in the cities, on the gold diggings, or on the poor selections in the bush. They saw that the law in Australia was imposed upon the colony by an external Imperial government, and when the colony gained enough autonomy to create its own laws and its own police force to enforce them, they were used as an 'instrument of terror.' The fiction discussed here portrayed Australia as a 'post-law' state, where that law was incompetent and capricious. When the law did not serve the purposes of the entrenched systems of power, the government simply changed them, as with the Felons Apprehension Acts of NSW and Victoria. In extreme circumstances they condoned extra-judicial murder, as in the case of Ben Hall.

Some years after he had written *Robbery Under Arms* Browne spoke of bushranging and highway robbery as 'a world-old protest against the dullness of respectability, the greed of industrialism, the selfishness of property'. (Walker, 1965, 14)

Knight has suggested that Paterson's *Waltzing Maltilda* marked a watershed between the early and modern period of Australian crime fiction, and this exegesis

draws a similar line at Lawson's 'Wanted by the Police'. Australian crime fiction of the early twentieth century was less marked by the moral ambivalence discussed here. Several factors might be considered to have influenced this change. It has already been noted that by the early twentieth century crime fiction had been codified into genre fiction, and Australian writers started to emulate British and American styles. Australian crime fiction entered a rather moribund period, and the distinctively morally ambiguous tone did not return until the New Wave period of the fifties.

On a broader level the nature of Australian nationalism had changed. By the end of the century, 'without much fuss or enthusiasm, the six colonies had voted to become a nation.' (White, 86). Socialism coalesced into the Labor Party, who 'demanded loyalty and extracted conformity' from its members. This was a far cry from the freedom the young Lawson had imagined socialism would deliver. (Moore, 112)

In the decade after Federation 'it was difficult for writers so long associated with egalitarian nationalism to resist the claims on loyalty of the new Australian nation' (Moore, 113). Even *The Bulletin* quietly dropped its call for a republic. Colonial nationalism became the new rallying point for patriotism, and soon even Henry Lawson was cheering the Australian troops who left for the Boer War to fight for Empire.

The fledgling nation started to look for new myths. The image of Australia forged in the nineties 'had already begin to sour' (White, 109). The banning of bushranger movies in 1911 showed that the entrenched powers had grown weary of the dissenter and anti-authoritarian aspects of the Australian character and were looking for a more noble expression of national fibre. The Great War was looming, and an opportunity for a new myth would present itself at Gallipoli.

END

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**END**