

# Coming Home

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 23  
Epilogue

❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦

*When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen.*  
—George Washington

*We trained them. We coached them. We turned our young men and women into exactly what we wanted them to be. Then we sent them out to fight. But when they came home we did not like what they had become.*  
—Anonymous

## Chapter 1

Restructuring. Cost cutting. Downsizing. Resource optimisation. Strategic realignment.

Whatever. Just call it what it is—corporate culling.

The process of company redundancies mirrors nature's survival of the fittest. The strong kicking out the weak. And the weak walking out the door.

Sitting opposite his now former boss, Mason Turner, a former Australian soldier, survivor of several tours to Afghanistan, a man who has stared down the worst of the world, wonders how he became one of the weak.

Mason glances at the letter. They roll them out en masse; same impersonal content, just change the name, date, print, sign.

*Regretfully... inform you... want to thank you...wish you the best... future career... yours sincerely.*

Mason Turner is forty-two years old, and as of now, the former purchasing manager of the Penrith branch of Southern Cross Building Materials. He is tall and strongly built, with dark hair and intense eyes. Those eyes served him well in Afghanistan, sifting through the lies the local women spun to protect their Taliban sympathising husbands and sons. He chased those wily Taliban all around Afghanistan, from Kabul to Kandahar, across the desert plains of Registan, to the booby-trapped mountains of Pamir. And somehow he dodged the bullets and returned home a decorated soldier but as of now, an unemployed social discard. Hey soldier, about your good work in Afghanistan, thanks yeah, really appreciate it.

“I am sor—”

Mason cuts his manager off with a stare. Mason is shaking. He has not taken his pills. The pills keep him stable and out of trouble. They keep him, in his doctor's words, *social standard*.

Boss man, a fidgety individual, watches Mason carefully. He has learnt that you can never predict an employee's response to this conversation. He hopes Mason will go quietly.

“Are you alright Mason?”

Mason processes the question.

Let me see. You just sacked me, removing my only means of supporting my son's schooling and medical expenses. You just stole the last remaining hold I had on my estranged wife; she hates me but can always use the money. And then there's the nasty thought that this is the thanks I get for risking my life for you and every other citizen in this country. But hey I'm fine. Never better.

"Is there anything else?" Mason asks.

Boss man shakes his head.

"How long have I got?"

"You can pack up your desk. Say goodbye."

People avert their eyes as Mason returns to his work station. He places his personal belongings in an empty photocopy paper box. A framed photo of his estranged wife and son distracts him for a moment. They are smiling. It is a different time and place. He sees his pills in the top drawer. He knows he should swallow two now and take the rest with him. The internal demons are waking up and sticking him with their pitchforks. But the pills will take him to a desensitised world where everything is so fake he might as well be dreaming. And for what Mason has in mind, he wants to feel everything.

Mason opens a blank email.

Choices; life is full of them.

Does he go quietly or does he deliver the proverbial email hand grenade. Tell the Company what he really thinks.

Mason instead prints the Sydney CBD address of the Company's head office.

Now, back to that email. Mason gets it all down and sets the email to delayed send; the email hand grenade becomes a ticking time bomb, set to detonate in the mailboxes of his former colleagues in ten hours time.

Mason takes his life in a box and starts the walk of shame out of the place. People look down and pretend to be talking on phones or tapping on keyboards. There are no *bad lucks* and *good lucks* and *you'll be rights*. Only the receptionist, the face and body (in this instance) of the place, looks up, curling her peroxide blonde hair around her index finger.

"What you going to do Mason?"

He shrugs. "Gonna get me job back."

"How you gonna do that Mason?"

"You'll see."

\* \* \* \* \*

Hot.

No, it is more than hot. Cooking. Roasting. Hotter than a Parklea Markets Rolex. Hotter than Satan's sauna.

And Mason feels it as he drives the streets of Sydney's outer West. The road and buildings are blurred by a heat haze. It reminds him of the Afghan desert.

Talk of bushfires is all over the radio. The media commentary is so alarming that you might think that Sydney is surrounded by a ring of flames each with a brain, intent on razing the city to the ground. Mason glances at the smoke in the mountains; the Blue Mountains not so blue. The fires have been raging for days, inspiring the usual comparisons; *worst since Ash Wednesday, Canberra and Black Saturday all over again*. Only this time the headlines might be true. The already

grim conditions are predicted to deteriorate as the wind strengthens. The convection oven turning fan forced. Hundreds of houses lost. People missing. People doing dumb-arsed things trying to protect their homes. People dead. As the fire with a brain flexes its muscles.

But Mason does not care about the heat and fires. He has a plan. It involves a long drive into the city and an unannounced one-on-one with the CEO of his former company. He intends to share some personal insights about sacrifice and respect and—

Mason is interrupted as his car coughs and rolls to a stop. He taps the fuel gauge; it still shows half a tank. He turns the engine over. No response. He tries again. Nothing.

“Bastard.”

He feels uneasy. He does not like surprises. He thinks about the pills he left at the office. The pills would cure the anxiety. But the pills would also remove his connection with the world, and Mason wants to feel things today. The way he used to before they turned him into a doped-up zombie. And right now, he feels the suffocating heat curling around him.

He gets out and sets his briefcase down in the middle of the road and rolls up his shirt sleeves. The road is lined with abandoned brick warehouses. Shattered windows and walls splattered with graffiti. Litter tangled in the knee-high weeds. There is a profound silence, just the hiss of the wind in the weeds. The heat radiates off the road and surrounding concrete. An urban Death Valley.

The scene reminds Mason of a show he once saw called *Struggle Street*, where the cameras followed a bunch of people living in Mt Druitt, a suburb not too far from where he now stands. The cameras followed the would-be stars of the show going about their lives. The weekly visits to Centrelink, the shops and rehab. The arguments and violence on the street. The bleak corridors of the public housing estate. It was social porn for the Eastern Suburbs. Where viewers could sit down in front of their infinitely large flat screen TVs and tut-tut and shake their heads and discuss all the ways they could fix things. It was real. Real people, real drugs, real prison, real domestic violence. The reality made it compelling. The reality of the reality made it unnerving. But it was ok, it was all out West.

*Thank god for the West. Because without the West, there would be no East.*

Mason hears the *clack clack clack* of a train and starts walking toward the sound. He passes an elderly man, all bent over in the heat.

“That your car?”

Mason has left the driver’s side door open and the keys in the ignition.

“You want to lock her up,” the old man says, “bastards will take anything that’s not screwed down.”

“Getting me job back,” Mason says and keeps walking.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emu Plains train station is empty except for a couple of school kids, or non-school kids as they are, shoving each other around.

“City,” Mason says to the station attendant.

Mason remembers a time when the bloke selling train tickets didn’t hide in a barred cell.

“Single or return?”

“Single,” Mason says, “not coming back.”

“Track work today,” the man says, “bitch in this heat. I tell you the heat makes people do some bloody stupid things.”

One of the non-school kids smashes a bottle on the train tracks and the attendant nods, his point proven.

“Had my way the little shits’d have a pick and a shovel. Have ‘em buildin’ the roads if they don’t want to be in school.”

Mason takes his ticket and sits in the shade. The non-school kids are talking nearby. All—

*Epic this. No shit that. Like this and like that.*

*Don’t need no school.*

*School is like for pussies.*

*Like where we goin’ like?*

*Like, we should like just like...*

*...learn how to speak,* Mason thinks.

There is a billboard advertisement for the Biggest Loser on the opposite wall. And beside it a poster of the rear side of a semi-naked Kardashian. More booty up there than Blackbeard’s treasure chest. The *Biggest Loser* or the Biggest Loser, Mason muses.

He gets on the next train and sits downstairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Death. Don’t ask how or why it comes. Just bury your head in the sandpit of the living.

Police officer Fitch Turner knows a thing or two about death. He has seen it. He has felt it. He has caused it. He often goes to bed thinking about it and wakes up having dreamt about it.

It is early morning but already it is hot inside. It is the stuffy, humid kind of heat, that settles over everything like a hot damp blanket. Fitch puts on the same blue and black uniform he has worn for the last three decades. He washes his face and stares into the mirror.

Cue ball bald, more Kojack than Bruce Willis, Fitch’s face carries the lines of his years of service. A line for each domestic dispute, a crack for each iced up junkie, a crevice for each armed robbery, an abyss for the... he stops himself, he does not want to go there. Six foot, with broad shoulders and thick forearms, Fitch is rarely intimidated. If you show fear you’re finished, just stare it down and get on with things.

Fitch stops by *her* room on his way out.

The bedroom is cool and dark. She likes it dark now. Never used to but now she does. He checks the temperature control on the wall; nineteen degrees. She is just a shape, like some tree roots pushing up the bedcovers. She will be like that when he returns. He runs his hand over her shoulder. She is thin and barely there. A ghost of a ghost.

Death, don’t ask how or why or when it comes, just get on with things.

Fitch smooths her hair down, kisses her forehead and steps outside, where the heat hits him like a wave. His car radio is alive with talk of the fires in the

mountains. Bad fires. The kind of fires that get out of control and take homes and people.

“Aw bugger,” he says, as he sees the date on the dashboard.  
It is his birthday.

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig King looks out his forty-sixth-floor office window in Sydney’s CBD. The sunlight flares off the harbour like a billion diamonds. Boats bob in the breeze. Ferries chug back and forth in the sunshine.

Craig thinks the scene particularly ugly today.

A view is a relative thing. It is very much influenced by the mood in which you regard it. Craig watches it from a bleak place.

CEO of the Australian operations of Southern Cross Building Materials, Craig is king of the Australian castle. The role was always going to be his. His father, the Global CEO and majority owner of the company, had prepped him for the position since birth, and gifted it to him two days after his twenty-seventh birthday. And right now, Craig would like to re-gift it to someone else.

Most wannabe executives do the hard yards through the ranks, get themselves a dime a dozen MBA, squeeze in the obligatory Harvard or INSEAD business school facetime (more theory than practical relevance but it’s dynamite for your CV) and then hope to get lucky with a senior appointment. But that route is for the plebs, not the son of the CEO of a global corporate empire. And the result has been telling.

Craig has single handedly run the Australian branch into the ground. The Australian operations are bleeding money. But Craig’s Executive Management team would never dare challenge him, for fear of his father. Craig’s father is god to them. His father could piss all over these people and they would just wash themselves off—*why thank you sir, now how else can we help you?*

The truth is Craig never asked for or wanted any of it. Business was foreign and unappealing to him. He lacked his father’s killer Wall Street “Eye of the Tiger” instinct. He didn’t move to the, *da—da-da-dunk—da-da-dunk—da-da-daaaa. Risin’ up back on the...* he moved to a more mellow soundtrack. More Calvin Harris and Bruno Mars than Survivor. Good looking, with brown hair and blue eyes, he looks the part, if slightly preppy kitsch, in his Hugo Boss business suit and John Lobb shoes. No tie. Ties went out like last century yeah?

Craig glances at today’s redundancy report. The latest collateral damage from his own ineptitude. It is the Penrith shared service centre’s turn to feel the heat. The unfortunate employees had been a faceless list of a hundred names until last night, when Craig, sitting alone in front of his office PC, called up every name and face on the Company’s intranet directory. He looked each terminated employee in the eye. If you can order the carnage, he thought, you can at least, kind of, watch it. Craig did not know these people but he saw husbands and wives, young, old, in between. People struggling to pay bills. People caring for family members. People paying school fees. People defaulting on mortgage repayments. People getting kicked out of rental homes.

People. He saw people. And wondered how he became responsible for the lives of so many.

Leaning forward and looking out the window Craig can just see the limit of the city's Western sprawl. The smoke from the bushfires is a black stain on the horizon.

Tough day for the people out West.

Tough day for the Penrith call centre.

Tough day for the people...

Craig's father's words echo in his brain.

*Don't ever think about the people son. The minute you do you're finished.*

## Chapter 2

Afghanistan. A roadside IED—Improvised Explosive Device.

You can't defeat the invading infidels with numbers and firepower, you improvise. You surprise them. You give them death from nowhere and everywhere. You bury claymore mines in the cracked cliffs. You conceal bombs in the sand by the side of the road. You strap explosives to men herding sheep and street vendors selling chickens. For the martyrs, death is just a destructive instant before the eternal pleasure of virgins in the sky. Then when the infidels get suspicious of the men you send in the women with death strapped beneath their clothing, and then—

—there is always the children.

This time death comes from a row of IEDs concealed under a cracked section of road.

The lead Humvee trips the switch. There is a flash of light and a crack louder than any thunder, and the armoured vehicle launches into the air and lands on its side. The next vehicle in the convoy swerves to miss the carnage and triggers a second explosive hidden in the sand beside the road (as if the perpetrators had anticipated the evasive manoeuvre), and does a monster truck style leap, catching fire and landing in a ditch.

Mason watches the carnage from the rear of the convoy and remembers how, if not for the mechanical trouble back at base, he'd have been first in the line. But now he is the gunner and when the order comes he starts firing into the hills. It is broad daylight, perfect visibility, the sky a pristine blue. Someone is returning fire. Mason can hear the rounds pinging off his armoured vehicle. Fear and adrenalin overwhelm him. Kill or be killed. And at that moment, in the midst of his first real skirmish, Mason realises how much he does not want to be killed. Not out here. Not shot by an unseen enemy he has no personal gripe with. His rounds decimate the cliffs. His commanding officer is yelling something but Mason's ears are too full of his own gunfire to understand. He keeps firing, swinging the big black gun back and forth until he has blown the cliffs to bits.

Then it is quiet. And through the ringing in his ears Mason hears the cries of the dying and injured.

The number one and two vehicles are on fire and out of the flames emerge people. They stagger about like flaming zombies, wondering where to go, *where's*

*the water*, and fall, as soldiers rush forward with fire extinguishers and guns to secure the area.

Mason watches it all. Wondering where it is that death comes from on such a perfect day. He looks down and sees a line of dents in the protective armour of the Humvee, centimetres from his chest. Does death discriminate? Does death choose? Maybe.

Then the enemy start shooting again and Mason ducks back inside his armoured cocoon. He's shaking and crying and pissing himself and picturing long forgotten memories of himself playing as a child with his parents, and wondering what led him to this. As the rounds clatter off the vehicle in a steady *clack, clack, clack, clack...*

*...clack. clack. clack.* The sound of the train drags Mason, sweaty and disoriented, back to reality. The train slows into a station. The hiss of doors. People off, people on. A young girl sits three seats in front of Mason.

The memories of Afghanistan come at will. The pills Mason left in the office keep them away. Doped up on the pills he can look at the nightmares like they belong to someone else. The pills are the core of the treatment for his post war traumatic stress disorder. Post war traumatic stress disorder—a tidy name for a condition that the public and medical profession cannot comprehend. And the pills? Well they don't treat the illness, they just make it invisible. On the pills, the illness goes into hibernation, off the pills, the demons come out swinging.

A group enter from the adjoining carriage. Loaded up with Macca's bags, they use the handrails to swing into the downstairs section. Five of them, dressed in bomber jackets, caps the wrong way, and pants ten sizes too big. A gang. An urban pride of lions. They sit, two in front of and two behind the girl, and the fifth, too close beside her. The lions have isolated their fawn.

*She be fine.*

*Like don't your mummy ever tell you not to travel alone on the train? It be dangerous.*

*Yeah. Real dangerous. Cause of people like us.*

*You might get robbed or raped or something.*

*Raped. I reckon she might like that.*

The one next to her, a ringleader of sorts, strokes her hair, and she pulls away. She is barely fifteen and her fear is palatable.

*What's a pretty girl like you doin' alone?*

*She won't be alone long bro'.*

*Yeah, she'd be lookin' for some. I reckon I'm gonna...*

Ringleader touches her leg. She stands to leave but they have her trapped. One of them snatches her bag and empties it; makeup and hair brush and phone with a Hello Kitty cover land on the floor. She starts crying. Begging them to let her go. They close in. They sense their kill is at hand. They—

*"Let her go."*

Ringleader turns to face the strange man in the isle. Some kind of dorky office worker with a briefcase.

*"You have a death wish or something mista?"*

*"No," Mason says, "but you're going to leave the girl alone."*



\* \* \* \* \*

Despite their collective experience and intellect, the senior management teams of most major companies are largely dysfunctional. Ego, pride, and self-interest. They bicker and backstab, while expecting a culture of teamwork and cooperation from their subordinates.

Craig sits at the head of the long boardroom table, his direct reports arranged down both sides. Head of Operations, Head of Marketing, Head of Finance, Head of Safety, Head of Human Resources (a good one that, people as resources; to be exploited like copper and iron ore), Head of IT, Head of Strategy, Head of this 'n that and everything in between. They all have their heads down, flicking emails and texts on their mobiles. Everyone is eager to escape this annoying weekly ritual.

Craig despises these meetings. The departmental updates. The confessions of poor performance. The finger pointing and blame shifting.

"The restructuring program," the Head of Finance, The HOF (not *Baywatch*—Numbers-watch) begins, "is on track."

The HOF passes around several spreadsheets. The lives of hundreds of impacted employees reduced to numbers and charts on a page. The Head of HR helpfully clears everyone's conscience by stating the program is being conducted by the rules; adequate severance packages, the right conversations being had, and counselling and outplacement services for every impacted employee. All of it conducted *fairly*. A nebulous word, *fairly*, it very much depends on whose shoes you are in.

"It was the right decision," Head of Human Resources says.

"Was it?" Craig cuts in. He can still see the faces from his intranet search last night.

"Well yes," The Head of something or rather remarks, "for the viability of the Company."

Craig shrugs and the conversation continues around him. Shifting from the annoying redundancies to other business. Sales and profits. Customer numbers and bad debts. Reputation and legal matters. Strategic acquisitions and divestments. Credit ratings and debt levels. Each member of Craig's leadership team is well skilled in tailoring their narrative to what they suspect Craig wants to hear. But the talk makes Craig nauseous.

"I declare this meeting closed."

They stare at him.

"What?" Craig demands, "this meeting is closed. Off you go. Go and manage whatever the fuck it is you manage."

The Heads of everything and nothing hurry obediently out of the room. Alone in the large boardroom Craig holds his head in his hands. Ironically, it is precisely this impulsiveness that his father wants from him.

*Well son, that was something. Now just redirect that animal instinct slightly, and you'll be eyeing off your old man's job soon enough.*

"What am I doing?" Craig mutters to the empty room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason looks at them. They're young, make-believe tough, propped up by the false power of the group. Mason considers his odds. Against one or two or three of them—not bad—if all five pile in he's stuffed.

"You got no business here mista. You best get back to work before we go to work on you, yeah?"

Ringleader has the stage and the others nod and snicker.

"I don't want any trouble," Mason says, "just leave the girl alone."

Ringleader looks at the girl.

"Well I'm afraid that she'd be ours."

The rocking of the train intensifies Mason's nausea from his pill withdrawals. He is shaking and struggling to focus. He feels the demons returning. But when he sees Ringleader's hand go to the pocket of his ten-times too big pants, Mason's instincts kick in. You spend years engaging the Taliban in Afghanistan you get perceptive to certain actions. *What's he got in there? Gun? Knife?*

"You're on dangerous ground mista. This is our place."

Mason dips and glances out the window. The graffiti ruined warehouses rush by in a blur.

"Well I hate to break it to you son but it ain't much to write home about."

Ringleader points to some graffiti scrawled in black texta on the inside of the train.

"You know what that says?"

Mason screws up his face in mock thought.

"Nothing. It's scribble."

Ringleader pulls his shoulders back making himself tall.

"It says we own this train and this town and everything in it."

Mason raises his eyebrows.

"Really? Just let the girl go."

Ringleader shakes his head.

"It says we own her too."

Mason feels the anger coming now. The pills used to suppress it. But without them the demons gather unchallenged.

"Look," Mason says, "I've had an ordinary day and I've got things to do. Just let the girl go and I'll get on with my business and you can get on with being king of whatever pretend shit you want to be king of."

The others get in on the act now.

"He'd be lookin for a ripping."

"We got the thunder and the lightning and we gonna piss down rain on this mo fo."

"Is that a warning, some kind of threat?" Mason says, "say it in English and I might understand it."

"Mother fu..."

One moment Ringleader's hand is empty, the next it is full of a knife. Mason steps back and the blade flashes by his face but the returning swipe cuts his arm. The young girl screams and cowers against the window. Mason swivels as the knife zips forward again. He avoids the blade and uses the kid's momentum to ram him head first into the train wall. The kid flops on to the vacant seat, unsure which way is up and which is down. Mason ducks a blow from another kid and

catches him with a left that knocks him back three seat rows. A third tries where the others have failed and Mason knocks him down with a short right and straightens him up with a knee. The others pause and see reason; what is pride against this. This isn't a normal office worker, it's Jean-Claude Van Damme in disguise.

The train is coming to a stop and the gang quickly gather their fallen mates. They back out of the carriage shouting hollow insults from the train platform.

"Mo fo..."

"Gonna kill you man."

"Get you and your mother and your sister too."

Full of adrenalin, Mason snatches up the Maccas bags they left behind and hurls the food after them.

"You forgot your lunch. What's wrong? Aren't you hungry anymore?"

Fries and sundaes splatter over the platform. Then the train is leaving and the gang are strutting and shouting and making hand signals that Mason does not understand.

Mason returns to the lower cabin. The girl has gone, probably unsure which is worse, the try-hard bomber boys or the deranged office worker. He sits down, angry and on edge. He breathes deeply, working to get his rage in check. He thumps the cabin wall and slaps his face. He did not want any trouble. He never does. Trouble just has a way of finding him. And without his medication the anger got away from him.

"Leave me alone," he says out loud, "leave me alone or there'll be trouble."

It is then that Mason sees his arm is bleeding. He wraps his tie around his forearm; tourniquet and elevation, standard military response to a laceration. Then he notices the Ringleader's knife and a mobile on the floor. Mason picks up both and flicks on the mobile. A screensaver of some gangsta rapper appears, Pitbull or is it Lil Wayne, 50 Cent maybe. Mason shoves the knife and phone in his pocket. He takes his brief case and gets out at the next station.

The street outside the station is a ghost town. The heat has forced everyone inside. But he sees the blinking medical centre sign—*Kingswood Family Medical Care—we bulk bill all procedures.*

"Get meself fixed up. Then get me job back."

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch is inside his office reading last night's incident report.

*Break and enter ("B&E") North Street, B&E Paulo Street, B&E Cromley Street, B&E... B&E... he skips to something different; Domestic Disturbance ("DD") Link Road, DD, DD... he runs his finger down the list, DUI, shoplifting, bag snatch, domestic assault, property damage, drug possession...*

The summary of last night's crimes is six pages long. Just another night in the Wild West of Sydney. Another night of the poor ripping off the poor. At least rob the East, Fitch thinks, it is a bit of drive but you get far better bang for your buck in Rushcutters Bay and Double Bay (it is called *Double Pay* for a reason), and the residents are so caught up in their millions, they won't see you coming.

"Happy Birthday Chief!"

Nate Ferguson enters Fitch's office. He is tall with blond hair and an unassuming grin. With just two years in the force he is fresh enough to think the world is essentially a good place. Give him time, Fitch thinks. But he knows the world may not give Nate time. You think the world is good, the evil you have overlooked sneaks up and hurts you.

"Is it?" Fitch responds.

Fitch had hoped to make it to at least lunchtime without anyone realising.

"Any special birthday request Chief?"

"A cloak of invisibility."

"Oh come on chief. You're only as old as you think you are?"

Nate, despite his youthful blinkers, is a smart kid. One of the smartest Fitch has been paired with. And Fitch is responsible for keeping Nate safe. Youth has its advantages, with speed and agility and reflexes, but it is experience that keeps you safe.

Nate sits down opposite Fitch.

"Bad bloody fires chief."

Talk of the fires is all over the station. An extension of the media driven hysteria.

*Three dead.*

*I heard it was five.*

*Fifty houses gone.*

*More like seventy.*

*Entire suburbs razed.*

*Gonna be worse this afternoon.*

*Deliberately lit.*

*Bloody arsonists.*

*Bloody murderers.*

*Lock 'em up.*

*Isn't that our job?*

*Not in this heat—ha ha.*

Fitch glances out the window. The wind is up already from the West. Ash is falling in the carpark.

"Reckon the heat will keep the bad guys indoors?" Nate says as he leaves.

*Unlikely*, Fitch thinks.

Alone again, Fitch puts the incident report in his drawer and as he does he glimpses a faded newspaper clipping. The paper stirs a sense of guilt. He does not want to go back there. There is nothing good back there. But he must. It is an annual sense of responsibility. An annual trip through purgatory.

He picks up the clipping. The paper is fifteen years old to the day and has turned yellow with age.

### *Young Officer dies in supermarket standoff*

The headline takes Fitch back to a late night St Marys supermarket. Fitch sees the face of the young officer, barely older than Nate is now, and a masked thief with a shotgun. The guy on checkout is shaking so bad money is falling on the floor as he fills the thief's bag. The young officer, Fitch's partner, is close to the

action with his hands raised. Fitch is off to the side, too far away to be useful. It is, ironically, Fitch's birthday.

Fitch knows the young officer, for all his apparent bravery, has realised an inevitable truth; that police school, with all its text books and carefully scripted real life situations, is a load of bullshit. Because when you're confronted with a sawn-off shotgun in the hands of a madman, the real world is a fluid and dangerous place.

The offender is high on drugs and the drugs create the illusion of invincibility; that he is bigger than the world and above the law. And holding two officers at bay with a shotgun strengthens the illusion. Fitch, as the senior officer, has a choice to make. Does he talk the lunatic down or take him down? The passive or the aggressive. A bit of the Dalai Lama or a bit of the equalizer Philippine President Duterte. The thief came into the shop with a shotgun, what did he expect to happen? But Fitch really does not want to fire his gun. You fire your gun and things get messy and unpredictable. And he genuinely believes that he can talk this guy down and everyone can just walk out of this. It is his birthday after all—right?

Wrong.

The world does not work that way. You can control your own actions but not the actions of others. The young officer, the kid Fitch has been assigned to protect, makes a choice of his own. He goes for his gun. Big mistake. Fitch sees the movement and rushes forward. The offender sees it too and swings his shotgun around. The kid has the speed of youth but the shotgun is faster. The crack of both barrels can be heard all the way down the street. The young kid's hopes and dreams end up leaking out all over the lino floor of the dismal supermarket. A harsh lesson in choices leading to choices leading to death. And the unpredictability of life's evil.

Fitch blinks the visions away and stares at the dated newspaper clipping. Fitch's own birthday is a reminder of his own ageing but also of the young officer who does not get a day older.

Fitch is distracted by his phone. He answers and the female voice is soft and barely there.

*You didn't say goodbye.*

"I did. You were sleeping," Fitch replies.

*How's your birthday?*

"Shitty."

*It's hot outside.*

Silence.

"How is it today?" Fitch asks.

It is a stupid question. His wife is dying of advance stage MS. She knows this and she is in constant pain.

*Shitty. Did you have breakfast?*

"No."

Silence again.

*Come home early tonight.*

Fitch hangs up, returns the clipping to his drawer, and steels himself for the day.

## Chapter 3

Mason Turner spent six years in the Australian armed forces, two of those on the ground in Afghanistan. What he experienced there was bad, it was a war zone, that was to be expected. What he experienced on returning home was worse.

They call it reintegration. Not to be confused with re-interrogation. It entails the reintroduction of returned serviceman to society. The disentanglement of the military past for a smooth transition into peaceful society. The very fact a process exists beyond temporary financial support suggests an issue somewhere.

But to understand Mason's reintegration to society one must first understand his exit. Don't judge based on *what is* but rather *what was*?

Twenty-five years old, unemployed, wide-eyed and green, Mason responds to an Australian armed forces advertisement and is blown away, figuratively, by a glossy military open day. All tanks and guns and Humvees and surface to air missiles. Tough movie talking sergeants; all Bravo 1 Niner, Roger this, and Alpha that. All high tech and cutting edge and beyond the dreams of a carpenter's apprentice. Why fix people's floors when you can be in charge of all of this.

A month later, despite the protests of his then six months pregnant girlfriend, Mason finds himself in a twelve month military training program. Surviving the cold, surviving the heat, surviving days without food, surviving hand to hand combat. And having survived the surviving, he learns how to tell a terrorist from a non-terrorist from a would-be terrorist. How to fire a machine gun, pistol, rocket launcher, anti-tank mortar, surface to air missile, stun grenade, flash grenade, bang grenade, and on the off chance things gets up close and personal, how to use a knife. How to sew up an injured buddy, how to sew up yourself, how to keep your head down and cover your arse. A thousand how to's that are all simple and fun in the make-believe battlefield of outback Australia.

For Mason, joining the military was a simple choice; getting paid to play skirmish with some like-minded twenty somethings, why wouldn't you? And what are the chances of Australia ever going to war again? Australia is a peace-loving nation, isn't it? We've learnt the lessons of WW1 and 2, Korea, Vietnam, and dare we say it, Desert Storm in Iraq. Haven't we? Really, what are the odds of Australia resorting to military conflict in this day and age, slim, Buckley's—

—better than average when you have John Howard in charge. Enter Big John, or Little John, as he were. It is 14 September 2001, and Little John stands on the lawns of parliament and declares war on terror. The day is warm, the sky clear and blue, as the then Prime Minister, in response to the Twin Tower terror attacks in the US, enacts Article IV of the ANZUS treaty, and commits his country to a war in the desert on the other side of the earth against an, as at that point, unidentified enemy.

Eight months later, Mason lands in Afghanistan. Sand and rocks and mountains and—

Terror.

Terror in the hills, terror in the skies, terror in the streets of the mud brick towns. Terror in the eyes and minds of the local women and children. And confusion in the military.

*I know we are at war but just who are we fighting again?*

That is one of the challenges of declaring war on an enemy that has no acknowledged leader or legal identity. But the old-timers are clear.

*The Taliban, son. Those crazy bastards in the caves and hills. That's who we're fighting.*

*Yeah, remember that dipshit Bin Laden?*

*Bin Liner?*

*Yeah him. He's best mates with the Taliban. Been up in those caves getting high on opium with 'em for decades.*

*But what have the Taliban done to us?*

*Not the point soldier. It's what they might do to us. Now get your shit together and keep your head down.*

So Mason does what he has been trained to do. He kills the enemy, once he works out who the enemy really is. Because the enemy look the same as the local farmers and shepherds, except instead of a staff they're carrying a Russian subsidized AK47 rifle.

*The Taliban, I know we're fighting them, but who are they? Are they a race, an organization, or some religious sect?*

*That's enough with the Q&A soldier. Who gives a shit? This isn't the time to interrogate the specifics of things.*

Because the reality is these Taliban, whoever they are, are loaded up with AK47, SAM, IED, shoulder mounted rocket launchers (strange where all those weapons come from), access to the Internet, and a local knowledge that makes them real dangerous. They live inside booby-trapped caves and move unseen through the mountains packing some serious firepower.

Mason quickly gets past the consequences of firing a gun. This isn't training, people actually die. He picks off some of the nebulous Taliban enemy. But it is not all one way traffic as the Taliban know about guns too and have a decent aim. And as the casualties mount up around Mason, he's thinking none of this was in the glossy military recruitment brochures.

The Taliban also know a thing or two about guerrilla style warfare. They bury death by IED in the sand and in roadside ambushes. So Mason travels through the desert in an allied convoy, living in constant fear that his vehicle might trip the hidden wire that blows his truck and everything in it to pieces.

But Mason gets through the first month, and the next, and the next, living each day in a constant state of anxiety, as he sets about erasing the Taliban trail of terror. He cuts down the Shiite women and children that the Taliban have left hanging from trees. He buries the severed heads that have been pinned on stakes as a warning to those that might sympathise with the Western Infidels. He sees fellow soldiers blown up and burnt to death. He sees severed limbs and mental meltdowns. He sees all of this and realises that it could just as easily be him getting shot or cut up. Death, in this god forsaken desert, is completely random and indiscriminate.

Mason cries when the Taliban ambush his convoy in a narrow ravine and rain bullets down on them. And he worries after he does some screwed up (outside the rules of engagement) things to the first Taliban he catches after that, prompting his senior officials to let him in on a secret.

*Rules? There are no rules. This is not a game. This is not sport. The rules you heard about back home were designed by men and women that have never had a bullet wizz past their head. So you don't be crying over a Taliban that would kill you just as quick as you might kill him.*

Then there are the Taliban that Mason captures for interrogation; interesting word that *in-terro-gation*, amid the war on *terror*. Mason does not do the questioning but he knows what he is handing the prisoners over to. He has heard the stories and seen the aftermath. The ones that talk get off easy. The ones that think they won't talk, always do. *In-terro-gation* is a very personalised activity, the trick is finding the right motivation. For some it's dogs, for others it's sleep deprivation or being stripped and beaten, and for the really stubborn there is always water boarding and electrocution. You just keep working through the toolbox until you find the right tool. Eventually everyone talks.

Mason lives and breathes all of this. He lives every second of his three years on the front line thinking it will be his last. A million images and actions hardwired into his brain. The things he does. The things he sees being done. The things he thinks might be being done. Humans being inhumane with each other. The inhumane being human with each other. And after a short time that way of living becomes normal. He becomes what the people who trained him intended him to become. A killing machine with a gun.

And at the end of it all he is one of the lucky ones who comes home. He swaps the desert for the trees and morals of suburbia. And once he is home those same people that turned Mason into that hunting, mistrusting, killing machine, expect him to erase everything he learnt and saw. Because that kind of behaviour has no place in Australia's cultured society. In short, it is just not cricket.

But you cannot erase what has been hardwired. It becomes part of you.

And that part of Mason surfaces now as he stumbles bleeding toward the Kingswood medical centre.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason has never been off his medication this long and it shows. He is shaking and sweating. He is muttering to himself about his injury and how he's going to get his job back. He ducks from his reflection in the store windows as reincarnations of his time in the Middle East return. He believes the enemy are hiding behind the buildings and parked cars. Armed Taliban lurking in the shadows. A blast of hot wind stirs the litter in the gutter like dust and spinifex in the Afghan desert. He takes cover inside the medical centre.

The air conditioned oasis snaps Mason back to reality. The empty white waiting room is a temple to the wonders of modern medicine. Posters of people with perfect faces on the walls. Celebrities endorsing cosmetic procedures. Charts of the human body with dotted lines and call out boxes highlighting everyday imperfections; *Don't let your body get you down; get down with your body*. There was a time, Mason recalls, when a doctor's waiting room contained the obligatory



skeletal mannequin and spruiked warnings about cholesterol and heart disease and smoking. The photoshopped, made perfect faces Mason sees now, are alien to him.

The receptionist looks up. Her face is flawlessly flawed.

“Can I help you?”

Mason holds up his tie wrapped hand.

“I cut myself. It needs stitching.”

She gasps but her frozen expression holds firm.

“What happened?”

“Cut it shaving.”

“The hospital is nearby,” she offers, completely missing the joke, “I can call ahead for you.”

Mason glances at the pamphlets on the counter. A complete inventory of body altering treatments: Botox, jaw line redefinition, eye lift, neck lift, brow lift, grin lift, butt lift, breast augmentation, umbilicoplasty (what?), gynecomastia (huh?); a complete list of things to lift and fill and scrape and smooth, including the twin sealed sections; labiaplasty and phalloplasty—and the perfect self-esteem hooks to get you in—*have you ever wanted the perfect smile—want your twenty-something face back—want to look and feel yourself again* (now that is stretching things).

“Is the doctor in?”

“He is out at lunch.”

Her expression holds like concrete but her eyes give away the lie. Mason makes for the closed office with the doctor’s nameplate beside it.

“Excuse me. You can’t go...”

Mason barges in and finds a man in a white coat with his feet up on a desk reading the paper.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No. But I need some stitching.”

Mason presents his hand like a trophy. The would-be doctor is shocked.

“We don’t do that here.”

Mason sits down in the patient’s seat.

“A medical centre that doesn’t do stitching?”

The doctor senses Mason’s unhinged behavior. He’s heard about ice and crack and all that. Like they say in the movies—he could have a live one on his hands. The receptionist stumbles in.

“Is everything alri...”

“Yes My Sweet,” the doctor soothes, “everything is fine. You can return to the front desk.”

“Uh uh,” Mason interjects, “you stick around My Sweet. Just sit down there on the desk. Can’t have you calling the police now, can we?”

The woman tip toes in on her high heels and sits uncomfortably on the corner of the desk. She is petrified but her face won’t budge. The doctor stands but Mason pulls the knife from his brief case and the doctor sits back down, patting the air with his hands.

“Now sir. Please calm down.”

“Look. I’ve had a bad day,” Mason says, “it’s a hundred degrees out there and I’ve got to get into town. This is a medical centre right? You are a doctor?”

The doctor nods.

“You know how to stitch someone up, yeah?”

The doctor shakes his head.

“What?” Mason says, “you bulk bill all these bullshit procedures. You charge the Australian taxpayer for turning people into Barbie and Ken, but you won’t do a wee bit of stitching?”

“Not wounds like that,” the doctor replies.

“Alright,” Mason says, “I guess I got to show you how then. I need a needle and thread.”

The doctor stands.

“Uh uh. Not you,” Mason says, “her.”

“In the cabinet down the hall My Sweet,” the doctor instructs.

“And don’t be thinking of calling the police,” Mason calls after her, “I’m just gonna stitch meself up and then you two can get on with whatever it is you get up to in this place.”

Mason looks around the room while he waits. More photos of pristine faces and bodies. A picture of a beautiful girl made ugly by a swathe of dotted lines and arrows crisscrossing her face.

“So tell me,” Mason asks, “just what do you do in this place?”

“We improve people’s self-esteem.”

“Really,” Mason says, “you ever set a fracture?”

The doctor shakes his head.

“Removed an appendix?”

*No.*

“Cleared an ear infection?”

*Negative.*

“Frozen off a wart?”

“Taken a temperature?”

“Prescribed antibiotics.”

“Diagnosed Tonsillitis?”

*Nope, nada, uh uh.*

“People come in here lacking self-confidence,” the doctor counters, “and they leave...”

“With a face that won’t budge if you hit it with a sledgehammer,” Mason interjects.

The receptionist returns and places a plastic container on the doctor’s desk. The doctor gets out of his seat but Mason waves him back.

“Sit down. You ain’t qualified for this, allow me.”

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The wound is deeper than Mason expected, but the shock of every wound is relative to those seen before. Cue Afghanistan and roadside IEDs and soldiers; delimbed, cut and burnt.

Mason falls back on his military training. It wasn’t all tanks and skirmish in the Australian Outback. Self-administered first aid is critical in conflict situations. He sifts through the medical items.

“First you disinfect,” Mason narrates as he splashes the wound with iodine liquid, “then you thread the needle.”

“A local antiseptic?” the doctor offers.

Mason ignores him and places his arm on the doctor’s desk.

“Come on, gather round.”

The doctor and receptionist move in reluctantly as Mason begins stitching. The needle pierces and stretches the skin, and the thread pulls it tight.

“You know I got sacked today after ten years with the same company. Then my car breaks down and I get rolled by a bunch of kids on the train. But hey, I got a plan. I’m getting me job back. Yeah, on me way to town to get me job back. Ain’t no one going to stop me.”

The receptionist starts to sway.

“Hang in there My Sweet. Nearly done,” Mason says.

She starts crying. Her tears running like rain down a glass window.

“There,” Mason concludes, displaying his sewn up hand, “a little crooked but not bad under the circumstances. Scissors?”

The woman cuts the thread before promptly fainting.

“Too much for her.”

Mason picks up his knife and twirls it in his uninjured hand.

“Now I’m going to leave and you, doctor, are not going to call the police,” Mason says.

Mason passes a woman in the reception area on his way out.

“Look,” Mason says presenting his bandaged hand, “bloke’s a miracle worker. Good as new.”

The heat hits him like a molten wave as he steps outside. He returns to the train station and gets on the first city bound train.

“Getting me job back,” he mutters.

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The call comes through on Fitch’s personal mobile, the number reserved for his wife and several others. The voice is female and upset.

“Fitch. He’s gone. I don’t know where he is. He’s...They sacked him this morning and he’s gone. I’m afraid he’ll...”

Fitch massages his bald head. The heat was getting to everyone, even his usually straight-minded estranged sister-in-law. Fitch had been close enough to Linda, his younger brother’s estranged wife, but less so since the split. Fitch meets her hysteria with some clinical precision.

“Linda. Slow down. Who? Where? And What?”

“Mason,” she says, “he lost his job this morning. They fired him. And he’s just up and gone.”

Fitch considers this crisis against the others on his list. Sure Fitch’s brother Mason has a history of violence; he brought the war back with him from Afghanistan, but therapy and medication had set him straight.

“He left his pills behind, Fitch.”

Fitch starts listening. On the pills Mason was odd but socially passable. Off the pills he was dangerous. Fitch knows this as he had personally advocated the treatment for Mason’s post-war traumatic depression.

Fitch remembers Linda first telling him about the demons haunting her husband. The nightmares and the cold sweats. How Mason was struggling to adjust. Fitch brushed it off at first but things escalated. Mason became reclusive, antisocial and abusive. Linda covered the bruises and cuts with makeup and lies. But people only walk into the kitchen cupboard so often. And it culminated one night when Mason, drunk and strung out, brought himself to the police station.

“Arrest me brother. Please.”

Mason was crying. His eyes shifting and unstable. Fitch had a dim recollection of his ten year old pre-war younger brother crying over some trivial mishap growing up. The unhinged adult post-war Mason was foreign looking. Fitch called Linda. She told him about the violence and how the bastard had better not come near her again. There was enough evidence to have Mason charged and Mason was up for it too.

“Go on brother. Lock me up and throw away the key.”

Fitch did, for a night at least, in a holding cell. In the morning when Fitch returned, Mason was red eyed and unable to recall the previous night.

“Do you know what you did last night?”

Mason shrugged.

“Bad stuff?”

“Yes some very bad stuff. And you’re not going to do any more bad stuff. Not to your wife. Not to your son. Not to anyone.”

Mason stared at Fitch.

“I don’t want to go back out there brother. I don’t like it out there.”

The confession made Fitch pause. How could this former soldier who had faced death and fear daily, be reduced to this? And prison was not the answer. Fitch believed there had been a miscarriage of justice. Mason had fought to defend this country and Australia had abandoned him. And Fitch, having encouraged his younger brother to enter the military, felt personally responsible for Mason’s demise.

“You are going to get yourself some help,” Fitch said.

Mason shook his head.

“I don’t need no shrink.”

“Think about what you did last night and say that,” Fitch countered, “think about the example you’re setting for your son and say that.”

“I never asked for any of this.”

“But you got it, so you got to deal with it.”

Fitch handed Mason a piece of paper with a number of a military psychologist on it.

“I’ll check with him in a week’s time to make sure you have called him.”

So instead of throwing the book at his brother, Fitch tossed him a hash brown and McMuffin, and a second chance.

“Eat and then get out of here.”

“He’s dangerous Fitch. He’s crazy.”

Linda’s frantic voice drags Fitch back.

“I’ll look into it,” Fitch says, “now stay home and call me if he calls.”

Fitch hangs up and finds Nate.

“Get up kid we got some work to do.”

“Murder or armed robbery?”

“Neither. Come on.”

“Really? In this heat?”

## Chapter 4

Now back to Mason’s reintegration to society.

So Mason goes to war intact and comes back a little messed up. To be fair the Australian government invests in the welfare of their returned serviceman. *We created the problem so we assist in fixing it.* Well kind of. There is providing assistance and then there is taking responsibility. The first helps temporarily with your problem, the second helps permanently with our problem. The government sets aside millions in federal budgets; temporary housing, employment support, free medical and hospital cover. But then?

Mason was assigned a reintegration manager who devised a reintegration plan and a reintegration timetable, complete with reintegration checklist and reintegration support pack. But Mason’s reintegration manager was clueless as to just what he was dealing with. How do you reintegrate someone, whatever that means, without understanding (experiencing would be better) why that person requires reintegration in the first place?

At first Mason appeared to adjust well; a poster boy for post war assimilation. He was happy, he was energetic, he was optimistic—on the surface at least. He settled in with Linda and established a bond with the seven year old son whose formative years he missed. He took a job in procurement for a large building materials company.

But slowly the demons caught up with him.

What began as random nightmares soon became a nightly return to the Stan. Taliban creeping out of the shadows. Bodies strung from trees. The disfigured faces of the dead wasting into the desert dust. And Mason was powerless to stop them.

Because how do you explain why you hide in the closet staring at the thin strip of light beneath the door for hours on end? Or why you duck for cover and reach for a non-existent weapon when a door slams in the supermarket? And why you are yelling abuse, that you cannot remember minutes later, at the innocent cashier at the post office? Why you are yelling at people on the street? Why you are hurting and distancing your family, the very people that waited for you to return from a war they never wanted you to fight?

Mason felt his family slipping away. He felt himself slipping away. He blamed the war. He blamed the people that sent him to the war. The politicians that beat their chests, committing Australia to war only to hide in the safety of their Canberra mansions. He became bitter toward the country he risked his life to defend, as the average Australian was too self-absorbed to understand the gravity of his sacrifice.

*What war? Afghanistan? Are we still over there? Didn't we get out of Afghanistan years ago? The Taliban? Tell me, why are we fighting them again?*

It was a war that the vast majority of Australia forgot the country was fighting. The only reminder was the odd body coming home. A momentary distraction before returning to the latest instalment of *Master Chef* or *The Bachelor*.

Mason fought his battle in private. He believed it a sign of weakness to ask for help. Instead he played mind games with his mind games and ultimately lost. In Afghanistan the fighting was simple, see enemy and shoot. But how do you fight the enemy in your brain that has no physical form? The enemy formed from the fragmented memories of what you experienced in the field, and the guilt of having returned home when others did not. The two A's, Anxiety and Anger, fed off each other. Anxiety fed his anger, and anger devoured his anxiety. He developed a list of criminal charges: assault, road rage, and domestic abuse. He imploded.

Thankfully, though, there is a name for all of this: *Post-war traumatic stress disorder*. It is real and it is debilitating. But outing it with a name is one thing, correcting it, well, where do you begin?

Mason begins after Linda walks out with their son and after some tough talking from his police chief brother—*you got to man up Mason*. They used to say that in the field too; *man up*, closely followed by an apologetic *man down* and a call for the medics.

Enter the Government sponsored psychologist. When things get too hard call in the brain shrink; a well credentialed university graduate who has read a lot and is therefore well suited to fix these kinds of things. The role of the shrink is simple; he picks apart the memories, discards the twisted ones, and puts the rest back together. Like fixing a battered race car. The shrink, let's call him Mr S, encourages Mason to talk about things.

But how do you explain to the uninitiated what it is like to see fellow soldiers ripped to shreds by roadside bombs or burned alive by anti-tank missile strikes. And how it feels to live every minute like it is going to be your last.

*Don't analyze things Mason, just talk.*

Mr S believes everything can be solved through Q&A.

*Tell me what you see.*

"I see bad things."

*What kind of bad things?*

"Real bad things."

*Describe them.*

"They're real bad."

*I can't help you if you don't share with me.*

"Alright. I see a woman standing over the burnt body of her husband after an allied air raid. Only she can't stand over all of him at once because there is a bit here and a bit there and some of him just isn't there anymore."

Mr S rubs his chin pensively, unsure what to say. Mason continues.

"I see a young woman with a rope around her neck strung from a tree. There's five others like her nearby. Their faces are uncovered, their hajibs having been discarded, in a final act of disrespect by the men that did this to them. And below one of the women a child is crying and reaching desperately for the feet of its mother."

Silence.

“Next? Want to continue? Mason has a thousand more stories. And when we are done reminiscing we can discuss how this country treats its veteran soldiers. How you risk your life for a country that doesn’t even remember the war you are fighting.”

Mr S surrenders. This kind of thing wasn’t covered in his university texts. He gets Mason on the pills. You can’t repair the mind organically you do it chemically. Two pills four times a day, and—

Mason is transformed. Well, he’s normal again. Not to pre-war Mason standard but social standard at least. Welcome back to the land of the living Mason, just pop two pills at the door and step right in.

But the human brain is a resilient organ. It is used to controlling things and it does not like being overridden by foreign substances. It resists. So they up the dosage of pills. The brain responds. More pills. Brain fights back. And so on. It becomes a chemical arms race and soon enough Mason is popping eighteen pills a day. The up is great, like flying with the birds, but the come down when he stops taking the pills?

Well just ask Linda and his son Ben.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason is feeling the come down right now. He’s fidgety and uneasy, and real thirsty. He has left the train in search of water and finds it in a 7-Eleven. He gets a bottle of water from the fridge and approaches the counter. The cashier is distracted by the television on the wall.

“Crazy. Nutters. Yes?” the cashier mutters to no one in particular.

The television is playing a news segment on the *War on Terror*. Now exactly which war is that again?

There is the usual footage of black clad supposed terrorist fighters marching up and down in the desert; guns raised like the spines of a porcupine, black and white flags blowing in the hot wind, and the dust cloud of a supposed suicide bomber in the distance. Then there are the Russian and US, yes, you heard right, Russian and US fighter jets dropping death together from the skies in the Syrian civil war. Blurred bodies lying in the street. Women and children crying.

The terror of the *War on Terror*.

All of it fueling the propaganda machine. Because like all good wars, the war on terror is fought in the field but won in the minds of the wider public. The footage cuts to the German Chancellor denouncing terrorism and muscling up to ISIS and the flood of immigrants into Europe.

The German Chancellor denouncing terrorism? 1940’s anyone? But hey that was then this is now.

The news dissolves and the cricket resumes; Australia none for 111 against the Poms, order restored. When—

two masked men burst into the store; one with a gun, the other with a machete.

“Down! Down! Get the fuck down!”

Mason lays down.

Gun Man approaches the counter. The cashier, a thin lad with dark hair, could be a poster boy for the 7-Eleven minimum wage scandal, shies back. Gun Man shoves a bag across the counter.

“The money. In here!”

Machete Man, hopping from foot to foot, scopes out the place, ensuring Mason and the cashier are the only two people in the store.

*So this is how it happens out here.* Mason has read the news about service stations and pubs getting hit. The news portrays the hits as well coordinated. The reality is remarkably clumsy.

*Dumb and Dumber*, Mason thinks. The blokes are high on drugs and think they can get rich with a gun and a machete. Even viewing things from the floor Mason can spot the flaws in their plan. No one manning the door blocking anyone else from entering. Machete Man standing so close that Mason could upend him with a simple swipe of his arm. Gun Man waving his gun around like a wand rather than keeping it steady in case he has to fire it. And the whole exercise taking far too long.

“Don’t move. Please don’t move.”

Mason hears the fear in Machete Man’s voice. He does not want to be doing this. Gun Man is more direct.

“The money you Indian prick. In the bag.”

The cashier hesitates.

*Just give em the money. Don’t be a hero. The owner pays you below the minimum wage and muscling up to armed bandits is not in your job description.*

Mason is afraid for the attendant but not for himself. You spend years fighting the Taliban on their home ground, and a knife and gun do not faze you much. And Mason knows it would take a certain type of person to try and kill him with a machete. To just swing and slash, as the blood flies, and he knows Machete Man just isn’t that committed. Mason is more concerned that the store attendant starts channeling his inner Steven Segal and gets shot.

“The fucken money. Now!”

A gun to the forehead clears the cashier’s mind quicker than a shot of Red Bull, and he starts emptying the register. And everyone is so transfixed by the money entering the bag that no one notices the movement at the rear of the store. Dumb and Dumber have incorrectly concluded that the store is single manned. Big mistake. Very big mistake.

Would the real Steven Segal please step out of the shadows? And—

he does. He comes out of a storeroom, swinging a steel pipe with all he’s got. Gun Man, Dumb, does not see it coming and topples like Saddam’s statue after the allied taking of Baghdad, his gun spinning across the floor past Mason’s face. Dumber sees his mate go down, weighs up the reach of his 10 inch machete against the length of the steel pipe, and bolts. The steel pipe follows him out the store and up the street.

Mason casually steps over the sleeping gunman, nods at the rattled cashier, and places \$2 on the counter for his drink and leaves.

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Craig is deep in thought when his secretary buzzes him. He has asked not to be disturbed. But—

“It’s Mia. She says she *just, absolutely, must*, talk to you.”

Craig rolls his eyes as Mia’s voice comes through high pitched and distressed.

“Craig. It’s me, Mia.”

She says this like she genuinely believes he might mistake her for someone else.

“I’m concerned about tonight Craig. I don’t know whether we should go to Ivy Bar or Cargo Bar. Kylie has invited us to a private party at Cargo Bar but Frank...”

She refers to Frank like he is a close acquaintance.

“...is making a guest appearance at Ivy, and I just love Frank, he’s...”

Craig tunes out from Mia’s emergency. He stares instead at the atomic mushroom cloud rising above the Blue Mountains; a thin column of smoke that expands into an ominous dome high in the sky. The end of things?

Craig checks his emails as Mia, his sometimes girlfriend, describes her like, totally, like screwed up day. First, her personal trainer was fifteen minutes late for her *hour of power* in the park. Craig wonders absently if said personal trainer made up for his tardiness with a free fifteen minutes of power at their empty house afterwards, but that is a different matter, because the late training session kicked off a nasty chain reaction that saw Mia like miss her nails appointment, and have to like cut short her power shop at Double Bay with sometimes good friend Sami, and now her hairdresser is like off sick, so she’ll have to go to whichever party they like decide to go to, looking like, in her words, a total manky skank.

Craig opens an email from his Head of Human Resources titled—*must read*—which makes Craig not want to read it out of principle. The police have been out to the Penrith office. The ex-wife of one of the terminated employees has called the authorities concerned about her former partner’s welfare. Bloke left behind a raft of essential medication and has not been seen since. Mr Head Off—Head Of rather—Human Resources, concludes it is all a storm in a something or rather and assures Craig there is nothing to worry about. Protocol was followed, all sign offs were received, everything was done by the book. Controller of all things human signs off with—*they live differently out there—LOL!*

“...you there... Craig... you there?”

Mia cannot hear him and is starting to panic.

“Yes,” Craig replies, “sounds like you’re having a terrible day.”

“Yes. But tonight Craig. Which party do we go to?”

Craig rubs his head wondering how this became part of his life.

“Ivy,” he says to get the sequence over with, “we’ll see that dick from the...”

“Bachelor. He’s the Bachelor from *The Bachelor*, Craig, and his name is Frank,” Mia corrects him, “you have to know these things.”

She breaks off for a moment and when she returns she is more frazzled than before, “oh shit and hell, we just got invited to a party at O Bar. What do we do Craig? Life is just like so complicated...”

“Go get your hair done Mia,” Craig interrupts, “the inspiration might come to you there.”

He hangs up and glances again at the email from his Head of Human Resources. His father’s words beat at his brain.

*Don't ever consider the people son. The moment you do...*

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch could never do a desk job and Mason's former workplace confirms it. Dark walls. Small windows. Staff trapped inside their high walled cubicles, tapping keyboards and talking on phones, and sneaking glances at the two police officers searching their former colleague's workstation.

Fitch starts with Mason's desk drawers and Nate the filing cabinets. Fitch sorts through reams of reports. Payment lists. Bank statements. Invoices. A team building presentation entitled "*Teamwork—the fuel of champions.*" A laminated card depicting what to do in the event of a fire or bomb threat; someone has scribbled *Run!* over the formal instructions of *Stay calm and follow instructions.*

Things get more personal in the upper drawers. Newspapers, paperback novel, reading glasses, family photos of Fitch's sister-in-law and nephew, and as Linda said, several vials of medication.

"What we looking for Chief?" Nate asks.

"Stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Stuff."

Nate rolls his eyes. Fitch often drifted into his own inner world. Fitch had told Nate only that they were looking for anything indicating where the former occupant of this desk, a recently redundant middle aged male, had gone. No where or how or why Fitch should care about any of this.

Failing in their search they interview Mason's former colleagues.

*Good riddance.*

*Bloody weirdo.*

*He won't come back and go postal with a shotgun, will he?*

*Bloody crazy bastard.*

Mason had clearly made an impression on his work mates. But no one knew anything about Mason beyond what they saw in the workplace. Fitch corners Mason's former manager.

"I didn't want to s-s-sack him," the manager stutters, "but head office give you a n-n-number, you g-g-got to meet it."

"How was his mood on leaving?"

The manager screws up his face trying to recall.

"Well with M-M-Mason there's w-w-weird and then there's b-b-bbloody weird," the manager chuckles.

"Did he say where he was going?"

The manager shakes his head and Fitch and Nate depart. Ironically, the only useful piece of information comes from the least expected source.

"You here for Mason?"

The receptionist flicks her peroxide blonde hair when Fitch glances at her.

"You knew him?"

"We spoke sometimes. He was misunderstood," she says, "people are so quick to judge."

"Did you speak to him this morning?"

She nods, curling her hair around her index finger.

"I asked him where he was going."

Fitch raises his eyebrows. "And?"

"Said he was getting his job back."

"Did he say anything else?"

She shakes her head.

"He wasn't a bad person you know," the receptionist calls out as they leave.

Driving back to the station Nate presses Fitch.

"This a missing person case chief?"

"Could say that."

"You know him chief?"

"Kind of."

"Reckon you should hand it over to someone el..."

A report on the car's secure channel interrupts them; the aftermath of an armed robbery at a 7-Eleven. Hardly news, another armed robbery in the armed robbery capital of Australia. But the attending officer's report is interesting. The shop owner swore the offender had a gun before he knocked him out with a pipe, but there was no gun left at the scene.

The information spikes Fitch's interest. He calls ahead and asks to see the CCTV tapes when they arrive at the station.

"Anything you want to share boss?" Nate asks.

"No."

## Chapter 5

So enough about the *what* and *how* of Mason's breakdown, let's consider the *who*? That is, *who* is responsible for his demise?

So, who is responsible?

*Mason is. Everyone is responsible for their own actions.*

Really? Not everyone gets sent to fight a forgotten war in the Middle East.

*Society?*

Too righteous.

*Our community.*

Try again.

*The Government.*

Now that's better. Governments make decisions and are therefore accountable. Let's explore this via some Q&A with our ruling Prime Minister. Turnbull? Or is it Abbott? No Rudd? Gillard? Pauline Hanson? Clive Palmer maybe? It is difficult to keep up with who is running the country. But it does not matter, let's pretend for ease it is John Howard, eyebrows and all, in charge.

First and only question.

*The war, is it right or wrong?*

Which war?

How many wars are we fighting? *THE* war.

*On terror?*

If you call it that, yes.

*What was the question again?*

The war on terror, in Afghanistan, is it right or wrong?

*It's a terrifying place the Middle East. It is overrun by terror groups. These terror organizations are training and releasing new terrorists. Spreading terror and hatred over the Internet. Recruiting impressionable young men and women (this diversity correction added as an afterthought) and turning them into terrorists. Promoting terror and hatred. Inspiring terror all over the globe.*

(Notice the political skill in the answer—terror-fying the public with every sentence.)

Yes, but is the war right or wrong?

*These people kill innocent people. They have sparked a massive refugee crisis. They can influence others. They are destabilising to world security. They—*

Right or wrong?

*They can—*

Right or wrong?

*(Deep sigh) well it's right—isn't it?*

Enough said.

Alright, so that was a little one-sided, a little *Leigh Sales*-esq. So let's look at things differently. Often it is easier to challenge the present with a review of the past. Let's start with the not so distant past; the Iraq war. And by this we mean Iraq war number 2. A war inspired by George W Junior's desire to mop up George W Senior's unfinished business.

Iraq invasion number 2 was a war premised on removing Saddam Hussein's access to weapons of mass destruction. WMDs. Remember those. No? Well it doesn't matter because there weren't any. UN security forces spent the best part of a decade searching for them and came up with nada. But the nimble political machine saw this coming and quickly adjusted the basis for going to war to the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.

So let's continue the Q&A with Little John H, who enthusiastically joined our longtime buddies the US and the UK in the *Coalition of The Willing* (remember that one?)

Question: Did the UN or any security force ever find Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq?

*Now. You see. Saddam was a very bad man. What kind of man tests chemical weapons on his own citizens? What kind of man supports the ethnic cleansing of sectorial minorities? What kind of leader tortures and kills his own people? Yes, Saddam was a very bad man.*

Now about those WMDs?

*But did I tell you Saddam was a very bad man. Part of the axis of evil. (Remember that one. The supposed unholy trinity of all countries bad; Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.) Those countries are inherently destabilizing to world peace.*

But the WMDs?

*Oh all right (pained eye roll and all), our intelligence was legitimate, but like all things, it is impossible to have perfect information. We make decisions based on the information we have. And what's it matter, Saddam is, was rather, a very bad man. The world is better without him.*

End Q&A. After all it is just the political washing machine on overdrive.

But is Iraq really better off without Saddam Hussein? Ask the innocent Iraqi people and see what they say. The Iraq war created the vacuum for terror groups to flourish. Like weeds twisting through the shattered remains of a fallen castle, those groups were able to grow in the secular aftermath of Iraq wars 1 and 2. And the military involvement of the West in their own backyard was the perfect call to arms for the disenfranchised youth. Let's face it, today's terrorist recruits weren't even born when George W Senior was strutting his stuff in the Middle East, but they know the stories; their fathers and grandfathers have told them what *really* happened.

But there cannot be a discussion of the Middle East conflicts without the oil angle. Forget WMDs and Saddam and that Axis of Evil thingy, there's billions of barrels of oil buried under the Iraq desert. Iraq invasions 1 and 2; the Great World Oil Wars? The greed angle? But the US got rid of Saddam and still couldn't get their hands on the oil. You see you can have a billion barrels of oil buried under the sand but if you can't maintain security long enough to pump it out, what's it matter? Never mind, the US developed a shale oil revolution in their own backyard. More oil than they know what to do with. Just pump it out of Texas and North Dakota and New Mexico and stick it to the Saudi's and their *OPEC* oil pricing cartel.

So enough of the critique of Iraq wars 1 and 2, now on to Afghanistan.

Let's begin with Bin Laden. Remember him?

World enemy number one. Instigator of the Twin Tower attacks. He was allegedly hanging out with the Taliban in the hill caves of Afghanistan. Well, the US got him ten years later. Not in Afghanistan but Pakistan. Those Stan's can be real confusing. And he turned out to be a frail old man who liked young women and porn. They caught him with his pants down, literally.

But chasing Bin Laden introduced the world to the Taliban. Another bad bunch. Harbourers of terrorists. Ethnic cleansers. Inciters of evil. So seeing as we're over there why don't we mop up that bad mob also?

But why does all this matter?

Because our men and women are risking their lives fighting for the cause that the government mandated. And when they come home to a country that barely remembers the war they started, it kind of messes with their minds. And when they come back a little messed up and worse for wear, shouldn't we try and help them. Shouldn't the instigators of the war on terror, and all the implicit supporters, which is, like it or not, every Australian citizen, seek to help these men and women? Forget about the *The Bachelor* or *The Biggest Loser* or *The Real Housewives* of such and such for a moment and consider the sacrifice these soldiers have made.

So back to the original question.

Who is to blame for Mason's undoing?

*All of us—maybe?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch is in his office thinking. That unexplainable sixth sense is screaming at him that things are about to get real messy. That his brother is out there, off his

medication and spinning out of control. But finding him? Where does he start? His desk phone interrupts his thoughts.

“So which one of those whores are you sleeping with today?”

Fitch presses the phone tight to his ear. The station does not need to hear this.

“You think I don’t know what you do? Come home late. Sleeping with those little bitches. You think I don’t know!”

This was the same frail woman Fitch left sleeping at home this morning. The same woman that called earlier to wish him a happy birthday and to hurry home. The expired woman coiling now and striking like a cobra. It was the disease talking. This was not the woman he married.

The doctors had given her three years, ten years ago. An imprecise prognosis from an imprecise profession. But the MS is slowly destroying her motor neuron function. Her movements have become difficult and her thoughts, at times like this, deluded.

“You like me being trapped in here don’t you? So you got time to flit around town. So you can sleep with those whores at work. I swear if I see any of those little bitches I will kill them.”

Fitch has heard it all before but it still hurts. Not the words but what they signal about his wife’s condition. Subconsciously he glances beyond his office window at the rest of the station. He is ashamed that this is his wife. That this is his life.

“I reckon I should just end it all now. Just get your gun and shoot myself. Is that what you want? So you can be with those little bitches?”

Fitch used to pray that she would get better. But it was a desperate impractical hope from a usually practical man. She would not get better. Modern medicine dictated a slow decline. So Fitch endured it. Not for the present or the future, but for the memories of the past.

“You don’t think I would do it? Just get your gun and shoot myself. Leave a letter blaming you. So your...”

Fitch gently hangs up. When he returns tonight she will not remember the call anyway.

“Surprise!”

A group barges into Fitch’s office with hats, streamers, squawking party blowers, and a cake with a single candle on it.

“You know you’re getting old when we can’t find enough candles to match your age.”

“Captain Fitch with his fifty year itch.”

“Happy birthday to you. Happy...”

Fitch smiles and endures the singing and candle blowing and kisses of his work colleagues.

“Speech! Speech!”

There was no escaping things.

“I was hoping for this annoying milestone to go unnoticed,” Fitch says, “wishful thinking in a department full of detectives. Thanks for reminding me I’m one year older. Now get back to work.”

“Aw. Captain of the Fun Police.”

“Party pooper!”

“Who’s been watching *Grumpy Old Men?*”

They linger a while longer before obediently filing out and Fitch, feeling every one of his fifty years, goes to check if the tapes from the 7-Eleven holdup have arrived.

“Just in,” the woman in surveillance says, “the armed robbery that wasn’t, enjoy Chief. And oh yeah, happy birthday.”

Fitch takes the tapes and settles into the solitude of the dark monitor room to watch.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So why are we here?”

Mason remembers it as the most common question from the soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan. Those soldiers questioning why they were sticking their necks out, literally, to preserve peace in a melting pot of ethnic infighting where there seemed no answer or end to the violence. Some soldiers had their own solution.

*Screw it, do us all a favour, and just nuke the Middle East.*

But, no, Mason has seen two sides to the region. He saw the bad but he also saw the good. He saw good and just people surviving amid the violence and hatred. He saw industrious people tending fields and stores and factories. Amid the brutality Mason saw good families trying to carve out a good life. Parents trying to secure the best they could for their children. He saw children fresh eyed and innocent. Mason saw these children and he saw hope. He pointed this out to one of his superiors after a nighttime raid on a supposed Taliban sympathiser’s family home.

*Irrelevant, soldier. There’s good and bad everywhere. If you don’t get rid of the bad they infect the good. And the good over here, they’re not really that good, they’re just not that bad. And if you accidentally get rid of a few of the good while trying to get rid of the bad, that’s ok. Nuke the Middle East I say, would save us all a lot of trouble.*

But Mason knows the nuclear angle is flawed logic even beyond the moral pitfalls of destroying an entire region of the globe. You might achieve an instantaneous fix, but once the nuclear fallout clears, the scourge of terrorism will merely take seed in another part of the world. Africa, Eastern Europe, South Asia. Home Grown (nice wholesome label that) terrorists in the US, Australia, Canada, Scandinavia. Terrorism has no boundaries. Cut off the head and another appears in its place.

Terrorism is not based in religion or nationalism.

Scouring the desert though, for a rarely seen enemy, left Mason a lot of time to think. The war, its premise and its objective, made no sense to him. Fighting to rid the world of terrorism. Really? Trying to defeat terrorism with terrorism. Mason concludes that the fight is necessary, there is no place for terrorism and cruelty in any of its forms, but the painting of an entire region as the antagonists is unfair. And he asks himself the same questions when he returns home. In search of answers he visits an extensive list of websites of supposed Middle Eastern terror groups and their supporters, but cannot discern any reliable message behind the propaganda of hatred and violence. He falls back on his own real life observations.

He compares the people he encounters at home to the good people he saw on the ground in Afghanistan. The self-obsessed people grown fat physically and spiritually on the excess of their own good fortune versus the industrious farmers and shepherds and shopowners dodging death in the desert and towns.

Different rules for different fools.

Except one group has the power to declare war on the other, without so much as taking their eyes off the latest episode of *The Bachelor*.

Mason is so immersed in his thoughts that he barely realises he has walked outside the town centre. Bush on his right and an old car wrecking yard on his left. He can hear the police cars in the distance, responding to the 7-Eleven robbery that wasn't. He crosses the road and enters the trees.

The shade offers some respite against the heat. But the silence and shadows unsettle him. They drag him back to Afghanistan. His medication starved mind confuses the trees for the mud buildings of a desert town. Eerie silence. The threat of death lurking in every shadow.

He pulls the gun from his pocket and checks the chamber, loaded, Dumb and Dumber weren't pretending. He tests the gun's weight and grip, sighting down the barrel, one eye closed, one eye open. He likes the feel of the gun. Surrounded by hidden Taliban, it makes him feel safe.

He takes aim and fires. Birds squawk and skitter as the trailing boom echoes through the bush. He smiles. That felt good. He sights again, bracing with both hands this time. A brutal thunder clap as bark splinters off a tree. But the Taliban are still closing in.

He ducks and pivots, then rolls, and slithers on his stomach, gets back up on one knee sighting with the gun. Taliban insurgents are coming out of the trees and shadows. *Come and get some of this*. He makes *pow pow pow* sounds. He rolls again and crawls into the undergrowth. Mason's eyes are furtive, peering through the thin spaces in the scrub. Watching, waiting...

A noise startles him and he spins, swinging the gun around.

*Kill or be killed.*

A jogger stumbles off balance, too stunned to hide. Following perfect crime show etiquette, he raises both hands without being asked.

Mason's eyes are shifting and crazy. His finger takes up the tension of the trigger. A drop of sweat stings his eye, he blinks, and for a single, soul redeeming moment, he sees the innocent jogger for what he really is.

Mason slowly lowers the gun. The jogger sprints away.

Mason is shaking as he returns the gun to his brief case and exits the bush.

"Get me job back," he mutters as he heads for the train station.

But he wants company and decides on a brief detour.

\* \* \* \* \*

Revenge. A dish best served cold but never on an empty stomach.

The gang have regrouped in a grilled chicken shop. The smell of cooked chicken and gravy fills the air. Fat drips from the twisting rotisserie. Bloodied and bruised, the Bad Boys of Western Sydney are still bristling with adrenalin from the morning's fight on the train.



*Fight*—if you call it that? More a one way arse kicking from an undercover UFC maniac. The old bastard had done them over, or—

“Took us by surprise,” Ring Leader says, “I cut him. I...”

He delivers a *Braveheart*-esq. motivational speech, stalking back and forth in front of the booth seats where his cronies are sitting. But his bloodied bottom lip messes with his put on homie talk. His *disses* and *pisses* sound like *wisses* and *fwisses*. And except for the bit about the cut hand, it is all imaginary bullshit. But the others get on board with it.

“Yeah his eyes were rolling back in his head.”

“He be shittin' in his wittin'.”

“We'd be whoopin' his butt.”

The shop owner watches perplexed from behind the counter. Their talk is a foreign dialect. It is inspired by some bad reruns of *COPS*—not the lame Australian spin-off but the original badarse US version where you got cops and gangsters doing bad things to each other—*bad boys bad boys—what ya gonna do...*

Well here's what they're gonna do.

“We should go mess him up gee.”

“Kick his bitchy arse back to bitchyville.”

“Go dis that old MF.”

But how? The MF is gone.

“Hey,” one of them cuts in, “I lost me mobil-ee in the mel-ee.”

Ring Leader's eyes narrow.

“You got *Go Fetch* app yeah?”

The owner of the lost mobile nods.

“Password,” Ringleader snaps.

Ringleader taps his mate's phone number into his own mobile and the app he purchased for \$3 that allows him to locate a lost mobile anywhere in the world, springs to life. They gather around eager to see. And what they see is a *Google Maps* map and a small blinking red dot.

“It seems,” Ringleader says, “that your mobile would be walking.”

Satellite tracking technology in the hands of the masses.

“Let's go mess this MF up,” Ringleader says, “and this time,” he pauses to reveal a black hand gun in the oversized pockets of his oversized pants, “we do it properly.”

They march out in their padded jackets to face the extreme heat, and the shop owner shakes his head in wonder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch sits alone in the dark room, his face very close to the wall mounted monitor. The specialised equipment offers some serious functionality; full HD, infrared, pixilation dilation, face recognition, super slow mo, super def enhancement—it makes close ups and freeze frames seem truly primitive. So intrusive is the focus of this thing that you can almost delve inside a criminal's individual cells, and seen the neutrons and protons doing their electron thing. And currently the technology is going to work on the grainy CCTV footage from the recent 7-Eleven holdup.

Fitch sees the store attendant straightening the impulse shelves as a customer briefly passes in front of the camera, his face cast in shadow. Then the would-be thieves burst into the place. Their faces are covered with balaclavas, one with a gun, the power forward taking charge at the counter, the other with a machete, on point guard. A man, maybe the customer from earlier, is forced to lie on the ground.

The shop attendant freezes when the gun is shoved in his face and Fitch thinks he sees a *Greatest American Hero* moment coming, but thankfully the kid does as he is told and starts emptying the register. The attackers fit the stereotype; all jumpy and fidgety and iced up. Of course it is the drugs that made them do this. Or is it the poverty and lack of opportunities? What comes first, the drugs then the poverty or the poverty then the drugs? Chicken and egg anyone?

Fitch is not interested in the attackers, they've done the crime, they'll do the time (and come out of prison worse than they went in), but Fitch is very interested in the civilian forced to lie on the floor. He has a gut feel about this one, and when his gut aches he rubs it. Fitch leans left and right in his chair, frustrated by the camera failing to reveal the man's features.

Then comes the sequence that has already gone viral around the station. The real hero emerges from the shadows carrying the now famous steel pipe and drops one of the offenders and chases the other out of the store.

Fitch backs the tape up. He watches the big hit, the mighty home run, the thief falling and his gun (the infamous vanishing gun) spinning out of picture in the direction of the customer lying on the ground. Fitch fast forwards until—pause—the customer is standing again and passes in front of the camera.

Fitch backs the tape up and freezes it. He leans very close to the screen and zooms and pixilates the footage, pushing the system's high tech features to the limit, edging things forward frame by frame, until the light falls on the man's face. Fitch is sitting so close to the monitor that his breath mists the screen. But out of the grain and fog a face emerges.

Mason Turner.

And Fitch knows his brother has a gun.

## Chapter 6

Craig's office. A confessional with a view. The place where his Heads Of—the leaders of the Company—come to confess their sins and seek repentance. Missed targets, accounting errors, contractual oversights, lost customers, product recalls, internal control breaches, reporting omissions, reporting admissions, reporting contradictions, reporting exorcisms, reporting WTFisms. A complete inventory of all things screwed.

Craig tunes out from the latest tale of woe from his Head of Marketing. A million unfortunate events that this man receives a million dollars a year to avoid. Tough market. Tough competitors. Tough suppliers. Tough this and that.

*Well tough shit.*

“You finished?” Craig snaps.

Craig is terminating a hundred people a week in the outer offices. Good people. Hard working people. People that would give anything to earn a tenth of what this man earns. The irony, or the reality rather, of the corporate hierarchy strikes Craig; the more you get, the more you get.

Mr Marketing falls silent. Where did that comforting shoulder to cry on go? What happened to a problem shared is a problem halved?

“Anything else?” Craig raises his eyebrows.

The man shakes his head. “No, that’s it.”

“Ok. Now please leave your office access pass on my desk on your way out. It has been a pleasure working with you.”

Mr Marketing is too shocked to move. Craig might be losing it but firing him on the spot? Really? He has been with the company 15 years. He has been a great contributor. He has more to give... and take. He... knows Craig’s father.

“A marketing strategy takes time,” his voice is a high pitched whine, “we can turn it around. We can...”

“I thought you had finished,” Craig cuts in, “that’s what you said.”

“Well yes. But...”

“Well what?”

The man doesn’t know what to say. Craig clarifies things.

“We let go a hundred and fifty eight employees this morning. All of them good hard working people. All of them returning to their wives and partners and kids to tell them the news. They’ve got mortgages and bills to pay. Kids school fees and medical expenses. Tell me, where do you live?”

“Bellevue Hill.”

“Got a mortgage?”

“No.”

“You’ll survive then.”

Mr Marketing is in a tizz. There’s rules against this isn’t there? Due process and notice? And redundancies and downsizing only happen *out there* where you can’t see.

“We sat in that meeting today all nodding and patting each other on the back,” Craig continues, “assuring each other that terminating those employees was the right decision. But those employees are gone because we screwed up. We made the decisions that have lost this company a \$100 million per year for the last three years. We destroyed the livelihoods of those hundred and fifty-eight people.”

“So that’s it?” Mr Head of Nothing Now asks.

“That’s it,” Craig says, “what do you want, a guard of honour on your way out?”

Head of Nothing Now stands.

“You’re crazy.”

“Maybe I am,” Craig says.

The man tosses his office security pass at Craig. It strikes him in the chest and falls on the floor.

“This company is where it is,” Head of Nothing Now says at the door, “because you screwed it up.”

That, Craig thinks, is the most accurate thing this man has said in the last five years.

\* \* \* \* \*

The report of an abandoned car comes in midmorning. An unremarkable piece of news; cars go walking, or driving rather, by themselves every other day out here. You need to get from A to B, can't afford public transport, you borrow a car. But the make and number plate check out with the details Fitch lodged earlier.

"I'll do it," Fitch said.

"On your birthday? In this heat? Send one of the lowies," Nate offers, forgetting, like all good lowies, that he is one of the lowies.

But Fitch has his keys and cap and Nate chases him out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

The car has been dumped in the run down fringe of town. The concrete lunar landscape is eerily silent. The car is unlocked with the keys still in the ignition.

"Crappy place to ditch a car," Nate says.

"You know a better place?"

Nate searches the back while Fitch does the front. He tries the keys in the ignition, nothing. He checks under both seats, nothing. He rifles through the glove box then the cardboard box on the front passenger seat. The box is filled with office style belongings. Headphones, paperwork, mobile phone recharger. A framed photo distracts him; Linda and Mason standing with their son, the ocean in the background. All smiles in a happier, pre-Afghanistan time. But nothing speaks to Mason's intentions or whereabouts.

Fitch steps into the middle of the street. He has the notion that if they left the car here it would just age and decay like the surrounds. Becoming an ugly urban fossil.

The rattle of a train distracts him. He glances toward the sound.

*He's using the train.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason is indeed using the train. Sitting alone he stares at the grim landscape rushing by outside. It reminds him of Afghanistan; an urban wasteland versus a desert wasteland. A poor zone versus a war zone.

The irony of military protection is that everybody wants it but very few (once they realise the reality of it) want to do it. The answer, seduce the vulnerable with money and patriotism. The world is awash with supposed reality T.V. but when did a military advertisement last depict a real life gun battle. False advertising? Or fine marketing? Whatever. But don't the employers, that is the Australian population, have a responsibility to at least be there to help when the covers come off and the truth is exposed.

That is, war can be very dangerous and it can really mess people up.

Suicide has claimed more Australian soldier's lives than any war in recent times. It is an alarming statistic and speaks to the plight and sacrifice of Australia's military personnel and their families. Because for every serviceman that dies, a part of Australia's psyche dies with them.

Mason sees it happening when he returns from the war. He attends the funerals. He places his hands on the caskets of former friends. He wraps his arms around the wives and children left behind and reminds them that the man they

have lost was a good and loyal friend. These men and their families have scarified everything. And rightfully Mason starts to wonder: Who is responsible for this?"

"Yes," he says aloud to the empty train carriage, "someone is responsible for it."

## Chapter 7

Craig King Senior is on his mobile when Craig King Junior arrives at Cafe Sydney for lunch. Yes, Craig's father passed on more than just his genes. A kind of weird high society kitsch thing to do, handing down your first name and surname. Craig Junior has researched lawfully changing his name but does not envy the feedback from his father. He'll wait until his old man kicks the bucket, deliver the eulogy, then submit the deed poll.

Senior is a big man and he stands awkwardly to shake Junior's hand, all the while remonstrating with someone on his mobile phone.

"A year. We don't have a year. I want that company in two months. Political hurdles, legal concerns. Just corner the right politicians, feed some more lawyers. Look I don't pay you to..."

Craig sits down opposite his father and looks out over the harbour. Lunch with his father is always at Cafe Sydney and always at this table. Why? Because it is the best. Best restaurant, best table, best view. The staff know Craig Senior by name. Fellow diners know him too, and they stop by, hand on shoulder shaking hands. You see Craig King Senior is a big time businessman. He controls a lot of assets. Which means he controls a lot of people. Which means he can influence a lot of lives. And that means he gets a lot of shoulder patting and hand shaking.

Craig Senior orders the same meal every time they meet for lunch; crispy skinned salmon with horseradish mash and snow peas. Business for Craig Senior is inherently unpredictable, so lunch, at least within the celebrity-esq. setting of Café Sydney, can be consistent.

Craig glances at his father. Craig Senior's suit jacket stretches tight across his broad shoulders. His face is bright red in the heat. Craig Junior looks around at the fellow diners; businessmen eating with businessmen, interspersed with some random fitly dressed women who don't work but come to eat expensively without hubby, on hubby's money. The same scene is playing out all over Sydney, people eating from the hands of celebrity chefs on other people's money. All chowing down on smoked salmon and caviar and twice roasted spatchcock and caramelised onion and ocean trout and 45 day aged grain fed beef. The notion appalls Craig.

Senior hangs up and tucks his mobile inside his jacket.

"Well stuff me son. I clearly hired a kid to do a man's job. Bentley and Co..."

Craig knows the company. His father has been seeking to acquire the smaller construction products company for some time. Senior leans in conspiratorially.

"The pricks won't sell. We've been courting them, sending them love letters and blowing sweet nothings in their ear for the last six months, but they keep playing hard to get. Their business is cash flow negative but they'll bleed it dry before they

sell. But that's ok. That's life—or death,” Craig Senior smiles, a wily veteran he has seen it all before, “we'll pounce when they're on life support, begging to be bought out. But hey,” Senior straightens up, “that's business. Now how about this heat? Bloody nasty those fires in the mountains.”

Craig nods and endures the obligatory sequence of questions his father asks.

“You good son?”

*Nup. Bloody shitty really.* “Fine.”

“You eating well?”

No. “Of course.”

“How's your mother?”

*She's your wife—you ask her.* “She's good.”

“She seeing anybody?”

Craig shrugs. He does not know if his mother is seeing anyone. It is a strange thing to consider about your own mother; *seeing someone, sleeping around, shagging, getting down and dirty, shacking up, getting cosy.* And Craig does not care about his mother's love life. He sees her only slightly more than he sees his father. She was a good mother. When he was young and in need of loving, she had been present and attentive. But Craig Senior had intervened believing the softly softly approach was ruining his son. Love, you see, has no place in the Boardroom.

Craig often wondered why his mother did not just leave his father. Just sign the papers and move on. But here, though, Craig's mother is more shrewd than even her husband. Sticking with Craig Senior does not cramp her freedom (she rarely sees him) and it makes financial sense. She gets to stay in her own private mansion on the harbor and throw her dinner parties with like-minded and like-situated female other halves of Sydney's business elite. Where they can bitch and moan and laugh about how juvenile their husbands, the leaders of some of Australia's largest companies, really are. She could sign the papers and get out but that would kill the lifestyle. Instead she lets Craig Senior play around with his young blondes and brunettes, knowing eventually his pecker will give up the ghost. And she has done her sums. She is better off with the annuity stream than the one-off lump sum. Besides, the lump sum is always there for her, a free option if you like. It is sound business logic that even Craig Senior would be proud of if he gave it half a thought.

A waitress arrives, a young woman that Craig Senior has no shame in assessing. She runs robotically through the specials and Craig Senior ignores them all and orders the crispy skin salmon with horseradish mash and snow peas. Craig orders a salad.

“And how's your girl,” Craig Senior asks, “the blonde—no brunette, what's her...”

Craig lets his father stumble over the irrelevant fact of his girlfriend's name.

“She's adequate,” Craig eventually rescues him.

His father laughs.

“Adequate. I like that son.”

Lunch comes and goes. There is the inevitable visits from other powerful Sydney businessmen. They focus on Craig Senior and spare an obligatory nod for Craig Junior, because, who knows, sometime in the future he might matter. Business

good? Expansion in the States? Australian restructuring? Good, Good, Good. Nothing for Craig Senior is ever bad. Things might be bad but you never say. Then with wine finished and coffee done, Craig Senior leans forward.

“You making money in the Australian business now son?”

Craig Senior cares about money. Not for what it can buy him but because it is the barometer of economic success. How much you paid for something or someone, how much you saved, how much you fleeced from someone, how much shareholders earn. Money is, for Craig Senior, the measure of everything.

“Business is tough, yeah?” Senior asks.

Craig knows what is coming. A cross examination and pep talk; chin up, toughen up, backbone, and all the rest.

Craig shrugs. “No more than usual.”

“I hear you recommended your Senior Management team just, and I quote, ‘get on and manage whatever the *fuck* it is they manage.’”

News travels fast. Craig Senior chuckles and shakes his head.

“And I hear you sacked Marcelles.”

“He was giving me a headache,” Craig replies.

*Headache*, Craig Senior likes that one too, he has a good laugh at that one, before getting serious again.

“A few Panadol would have been a cheaper cure.”

Craig Senior likes his son’s animal instinct, but firing Marcelles, a long-standing marketing executive, was short-sighted. His son could have benefited from the older employee’s experience.

“But hey son, they’re choices. You make ‘em and you live by ‘em.’”

Listening to his father now reminds Craig of a time growing up. He was fourteen and had volunteered to deliver meals to the homeless around the city. He had found the exercise uplifting, completely missing the irony of a group of private schoolboys dressed in their Guess t-shirts and CK jeans and Old Skool Vans sneakers, dishing out ten dollar meals to the destitute. The boys had been swept away in the euphoria that comes with helping the less fortunate. Craig got an hour into the three hour initiative before his father’s chauffeur driven sedan pulled up alongside them. Craig Senior wound down the back window and ordered his son to get in. Craig saw his father’s look and did. When the car got back on the road, Craig Senior glared at him.

“Is this what I brought you up to be? A slave. You work for money. Someone wants something they pay you for it. And why you helping a bunch of derelicts? You give them one meal they’ll come looking for another. They made their choices and they carry the consequences.”

Craig could have presented the counter argument of luck and opportunity and unequal education, but he was too afraid. He endured the ride home in silence.

“We’ve injected another \$100 million into the Australian division,” Craig Senior says presently.

Craig nods. He has blown the last \$100 million of his father’s play money. Appointing him Managing Director was proving an expensive hands-on lesson. Craig had secretly hoped that losing the last amount might have brought an end to the painful experiment.

“You devise a strategy and you stick with it,” Senior says, “and next time one of your management team gives you a headache, call me first.”

Craig Senior concludes with a smile and a fatherly pat on the shoulder.

“Chin up son. It’s only money.”

Craig Senior settles the bill and they leave. They shake hands outside and Senior holds his son’s hand a moment longer to impart a final pearl of wisdom.

“Now son, don’t screw this up.”

## Chapter 8

It was miserable the day they brought Ben, Mason’s only son, to Ridgeland school. The rain was coming down in sheets as they passed through the high bronze gates. *Ridgeland School—developing students potential.* The brochures spruiked a wonderful place with glossy photoshopped pictures of the *normal* students and facilities. Pictures of teachers helping students. Students helping other students. And, wait for it, students helping themselves. All staged to perfection. A culture of cooperation and high achievement.

The reality, Mason discovered, sitting inside the school office beside Linda and Ben, his thirteen year old son, was vastly different. A seventeen year old kid sat in the corner; old enough to drive but displaying the functionality of a newborn, as he slammed his head against the wall, before his parents led him, bloodied and howling, outside. Another kid was talking to himself in the corner as a teenager was dragged thrashing and screaming into the office like a four-year-old on his first day of preschool.

*Welcome to your new school Ben. How do you like your new class mates?*

Mason glanced at his son, who, seemingly oblivious to things, sat scribbling in his drawing pad.

*Just talk son and we can walk straight out of here. Talk and you don’t got to be part of this. Just talk and I don’t have to tell me mates I enrolled you in the crazy school.*

You see Ben does not suit normal schooling as he does not speak. He has not spoken for five years.

“This is wrong,” Mason mutters to Linda, “he’s not like them.”

Linda does not respond. She just stares straight ahead.

The kid that jackhammered the wall returns, they’ve cleaned the blood off him, and his parents are holding his hands. But the kid takes one look at the place and shakes free and finds his favourite wall again. Mother stands and holds her mouth in shock as father tries to pull the kid away, before a pair of school staffers lead the child into the back office.

A staff member approaches Mason and Linda.

“Good morning. You are here for your first day?”

She checks her paperwork and crouches in front of Ben.

“Ben. It is nice to meet you. Welcome to our school.”

Then to Mason and Linda.



“A staff member will be out shortly to show you around.”

Mason has seen enough.

“Ben, let’s go to the bathroom.”

Mason leads his son to a restroom outside the office. As soon as they are inside he pins his son to the wall.

“What is going on? Talk. Just say something and we don’t got to do this.”

Ben stares blankly at his father.

“You want to be part of this loony asylum?”

Mason’s voice is loud in the enclosed space.

“What’s it gonna take to get you to talk?”

Mason is dreading the inevitable questions from his mates.

*Where’s your kid going to school? Western Sydney Grammar? St Pius Catholic? Nup. You know that walled up psycho asylum. The one where they lock the kids in? Yeah. That’s the one.*

“Talk,” Mason pleads, “say something. Anything!”

He’s slamming his son up against the tiles.

“Talk. Talk. T—”

Linda bursts in and pulls Mason back.

“Get off him you animal.”

Mason staggers back and Linda holds Ben and glares at her husband.

“You punish him? When this is all because of you.”

Mason blinks himself back to reality as he approaches the front gate of *Ridgeland School*. Unlike the day they enrolled Ben it is not raining, instead, it is forty plus degrees and there is smoke in the air. Seeing the place from the outside you might mistake it for the grand entrance of a prestigious private school. The red brick wall and bronze patterned gate. The prestigious plaque bearing the school’s name and Latin motto.

The grounds inside are well maintained but sterile. There are no kids out playing in the playground. No crooked art work stuck to the walls. No forgotten clothing or lunchboxes or balls lying around. Everything is in its place. It looks wrong. A class of kids are sitting around a teacher under a tree. Nature class for the nutters, Mason thinks.

The office is quiet when Mason enters, just the bubbling of the filtered water dispenser. A ceiling fan twists slowly in the heat. The young woman looks up from behind the high counter.

“Yes?”

“My name is Mason Turner, I would like to see my son Ben.”

“One moment,” the woman taps her keyboard and glances at the screen, her expression tightens.

“Ah Mr Turner, it seems you are not listed as one of Ben’s guardians.”

The words strike Mason like a spear. Linda has cut off the one aspect of their relationship he thought they still shared.

“Check again please. I am his father.”

The woman pretends to check but returns the same response.

“If you would like to arrange with Ben’s mother, then maybe you can see him.”

“He is my son.”

The woman nods in mock understanding.

“Yes Mr Turner but we have protocols to keep our students safe.”

Mason sees the way she looks at him. His request and his appearance is making her nervous. He had not expected this obstacle. Instinctively his hand settles around the gun inside his pocket.

*The easy way or the hard way. Which will it be?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig needs to talk to his people. Not his management team but the wider employee group. They are waiting for him, two hundred of them, congregated in the hired auditorium across the street. It is the usual town hall style presentation where he is expected to communicate the Company’s strategy and explain the Company’s recent performance. It is supposed to be an uplifting experience. A chance to buoy everyone’s spirits, get everyone working together, and reassure them that their livelihoods are in safe hands.

But Craig has had enough of the lies. He cannot stand in front of that group and preach false hopes like a traveling medicine man. So he takes the unprecedented step of cancelling the presentation ten minutes after it is supposed to have started. His Personal Assistant is concerned.

“But everyone is already waiting for you.”

“Cancel it,” Craig confirms.

His PA smells trouble. She knows how the office rumour mill works.

“People will talk and take the wrong message Craig.”

“People always talk,” Craig counters.

“What do I say?”

Craig shrugs. “Don’t know. Whatever works. Maybe the truth.”

*Which is...*

She raises her eyebrows and leaves, and is replaced by Craig’s Head of Legal.

“Hey aren’t you supposed to be across the road?” Head of Legal asks.

“Aren’t you?” Craig counters.

Head of Legal avoids the exchange and gets to the point.

“We have got an issue Craig. Read this.”

Head of Legal hands Craig a letter and exits. Craig glances at the letter, a service of claim for fifty million dollars from one of the Company’s largest suppliers. He shrugs and places the letter at the bottom of his in tray; the space reserved for matters deemed too hard to deal with right now. He sits back and glances out his window. The smoke from the bushfires has spread half way to the city. The billowing black cloud casting the earth in shade.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason holds the smooth handle of the gun in his pocket.

Choices. Life is full of them. You live and die by them. Rewind to the long gone driver of the Humvee that tripped the IED in Afghanistan—do I steer a little to the left or just a little to the *ri—boom*.

Mason has a choice to make as he studies the woman behind the counter. He tries to read her eyes. He got good at reading eyes in Afghanistan. But that was the Afghan desert not some civilized society like Sydney. There are other ways. He takes his hand off the gun.

“Ok,” he says, “have a good day.”

He leaves the office just as the school bell sounds and kids appear in the grounds. There is no rush like a conventional school; no scramble for handball courts and cricket nets and the cool places to sit. The students seem to crawl out of the cracks like timid rats.

By chance Mason spots his son in the crowd. Walking alone with his head down and carrying a book. He sits in the shade of a tree.

“Ben.”

The boy recognises the voice and looks up. He does not say anything. Why would he? He has brown hair and is tall for his age. His skin is pale and smooth. He is a good looking kid. Girls might rate him if he could string two words together.

“No lunch?” Mason says, noticing the other kids opening lunch boxes and paper bags.

No response.

“Want to get something to eat?” Mason says, heading for the front gate.

Ben knows that leaving school grounds is a big no-no. He also knows what happens when he defies his father.

“Come on son. Will be fun. A bit of father son time.”

Ben pauses at the exit, the threshold between the imprisoned and the free. He glances over his shoulder to where the teacher on duty is distracted by something on the far side of the lawn.

“Come on,” Mason beckons with a flick of his head, “an adventure. I’ll show you a bit of what this world has become.”

Ben follows his father up the street.

*Choices. Mason thinks. Life is full of em.*

## Chapter 9

KFC, because they don’t have Café Sydney out West. Mason eats a crispy skin chicken burger and watches his son scribble in his drawing pad.

“You gonna eat something son?”

Ben doesn’t look up.

“How’s your mother?”

Ben glances at his father but does not say anything.

“You’re like the perfect confidant son, everything in and nothing out.”

Mason knows his son hears everything he says. And he also knows from years of practice that one-sided conversations are real annoying. He has just finished telling his son about his morning. And about how together they’re going to get his job back. His son does not offer so much as a raised eyebrow in response.

“I hear you’re getting better,” Mason says, “that you at least respond when someone speaks. Don’t say nothin’ but you listen. They reckon you’re sharp with your maths. But I don’t reckon we’ll see you on the debating team, huh?”

Mason laughs at his own joke.

“Nutty as a bloody squirrel. That’s my boy.”

Mason continues the rhetorical conversation but in time it raises old frustrations. He has taken Ben out of school because he believes, as he has for the last six years, that he might be able to fix his son. That they might, for an afternoon at least, be like a normal father and son. Just shoot the breeze about rugby league, cricket, or fishing. But the present sequence merely reminds Mason that his son is beyond fixing.

“You gonna scribble in that book all your life?”

There is a flicker of fear in Ben’s eyes.

“You know what you have done to me?” Mason continues, “turned me as nutty as you are. Bloody embarrassment you being in that nuthouse school. I should just cut you loose. Don’t even know why I’m here.”

Mason gets increasingly unhinged as he talks. The room seems to shift around him. He slaps his face and rubs his eyes.

“How about a test?” Mason says.

The black gun looks out of place in the plastic whiteness of KFC.

“Now kid imagine you’re facing a madman with a gun,” Mason points the gun at his son, “some crazy bastard who’s come off his drugs and is gonna shoot you unless you say something. A single word. Anything. This madman ain’t fussy. Just tell him a joke. Just say hi.”

Ben does not move. He has been catapulted back five years to a dreadful afternoon inside his family home. Except his mother is not around now to protect him as Mason presses the gun to his forehead.

“Would you talk to save your own life?”

Mason is shaking really bad now. It is the kind of shaking that might see you fire a gun by accident. What started as a dramatic experiment is suddenly real. The demons have him, swapping the Western Sydney KFC for an Afghan home. The Taliban sympathiser knows things but he won’t talk, not even with a gun at his head. *Talk. Where are your people hiding? Who gives the orders? Who supplies the weapons? Talk. What is the next target? Talk.*

Ben is shaking. The gun is shaking. The room is shaking. Ben believes his father will shoot him if he moves. Then—

Divine intervention. A guardian angel in disguise. The teen KFC worker, immersed in her headphone music does not notice the gun, or if she does, thinks nothing of it, as she removes Mason’s food tray. The distraction breaks Mason’s spell and he lowers the gun. Ben takes his pad back and starts drawing again.

Mason sees some girls, two tables over, looking at him. They’re not frightened by the gun. Instead they’re giggling and looking around for the hidden camera, thinking it is some kind of *YouTube* prank. Mason points the gun at them and they just laugh harder. He considers shooting one of them in the leg to prove that this is not a laughing matter. But instead he pulls a face and puts the gun away.

“You think I’m crazy don’t you kid?” Mason says.

If Ben hears he does not let on. He just keeps drawing in his book.

“Show me that thing,” Mason snatches the book from his son.

He flicks through the pages. There are sketches of dragons and birds and people. Long delicate strokes with intricate shades and shadows. He stops when

he comes to a picture of a young naked girl; her hair hanging down over her shoulders and front.

“Now who is this?” Mason asks conspiratorially.

Ben stares at his father.

“Is that your girlfriend son? Is that your main squeeze?”

Silence.

“You ever been with a girl son? You ever seen a girl naked? Run your hands over a naked girl’s body? Eh? Ever done that son?”

Ben blushes. Mason believes he might have found a button and he keeps pressing it.

“I don’t think you have. I mean, it’s not like you’re about to ask anyone out. But hey, that’s fine, we can fix things, I know the perfect place. Come on.”

Mason gets up and leaves. Ben doesn’t want to follow but he feels afraid outside the school grounds. He tucks his book under his arm and hurries after his father.

“Come on kid. We don’t got much time but this is important.”

Mason leads Ben down a narrow street and stops outside a brown door marked Thai Massage.

\* \* \* \* \*

Talk of Craig’s unravelling is all over the office. You don’t cancel an all of head office love-in session at the last minute, get heavy handed with your Heads Of, and fire your marketing chief on the spot, without people talking. And doesn’t everyone love some office gossip. There’s whispering in the photocopy room, emails being flicked back and forth (IT do read those emails you know), and brave employees in the food court at lunchtime.

*He’s losing it.*

*He lost it ages ago.*

*Gone mental.*

*Reckon it’s the heat getting to him.*

*Alright—now stop being polite.*

*Craig was a dope.*

*Daddy’s Boy couldn’t cut it.*

*Now that’s better.*

*Daddy couldn’t cut it.*

*Ok, careful now. Craig Senior has ears everywhere.*

*Craig was too young.*

*Now that’s totally ageist.*

*I don’t care I think he’s cute.*

*That’s like so sexist.*

*He was never going to cut it.*

*Pessimist.*

*What’s it matter the Company’s like so majorly screwed.*

*That’s so like alarmist.*

*We’re all screwed.*

*So defeatist.*

*I just wish people respected each other a bit more.*

*Pacifist.*

*Alright stop with the ists already, you're all being antagonists.*

*Shut up you dipshitist.*

A million and one "ists" to describe the indescribable, and they all laugh and slurp themselves silly on cheap lunchtime laksa and noodles. But the reality is Craig Junior is going to drag a load of others down with him.

*We're all like going to like lose our jobs.*

*Who cares? I'm gonna be a personal trainer.*

Now that's the spirit. Don't let a little job insecurity get you down. The world can always use another personal trainer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason stands in a small budget hotel style reception area; high wooden counter, worn red sofa, and a ridiculously out of place landscape painting on the wall. A curtain made of beads hangs from the roof concealing a room behind the counter. A rerun of *M\*A\*S\*H* is playing on the old style box television behind the counter.

Mason bangs impatiently on the counter. In time the hanging beads rattle and a man appears. A praying mantis, with thin wire like hair combed across his scalp. He wears glasses and speaks with an Eastern European accent.

"It is early today no?"

"A woman. For him," Mason says nodding toward Ben.

The man chuckles. He has seen this kind of father son thing before. Normally it is with the disabled. Sex, everyone needs it. Lucky for his business.

"Do you have a favourite?" the man asks, "I cannot guarantee she is here. Night time yes but," he checks the clock on the wall, "lunchtime is difficult no? These lazy bitches sleep most of the day."

"Any will do," Mason snaps.

The man smiles. He likes the non fussy types. Easy pleased. Easy money. Easy all round.

The man leads them down a long corridor that smells of cigarettes and alcohol. They pass several closed doors before they stop at a staircase with a wooden bannister.

He claps his hands and whistles. For a moment nothing happens. Then there is the patter of feet and a moment later a young girl descends the stairs. Although her black hair hides her face, Mason can deduce that she is Asian. It is a Thai massage place after all. She is dressed in black lace underwear and suspenders. She looks like a young girl dressed up in her mother's clothing. She stands next to the man. He forces her chin up so that Mason can see her face. Her complexion is flawless porcelain.

"Beautiful, no?"

The man slaps her backside and she turns slowly in a circle.

"A little thin I know. A little, how you say, sickly, yes? But a girl all the same. Speak," the man orders.

The girl stands with her head bowed.

"Speak!"

The man slaps her face and she looks up. Mason sees the fear in her eyes.

"Ah, gut morning."

“Stupid, but we do not pay for their brains, yes?” the man says.

Mason has lost his appetite for things. He is suddenly embarrassed to have brought his son to this place.

“We’re leaving,” Mason says.

The man scurries over and clutches his arm.

“No, you stay. She may not be much but she is cheap this morning, very cheap.”

He whistles and barks an order in Thai. The girl shakes her head. The pimp slaps her face and repeats his order. Reluctantly the girl starts to sway to non-existent music.

“You like, eh?” the man glances eagerly at Mason, “you like?”

He barks more orders and the girl moves faster. While she moves the man grabs a long bamboo cane from beside the staircase. When the girl slows he strikes her legs. She keeps dancing. He hits her again. The man is smiling, enjoying the power the cane brings.

Mason quietly leaves and the pimp, so caught up in his twisted pleasure, does not notice. But Mason stops at the reception area. He listens to the fizz and slap of the cane. It is getting louder and more frenzied.

“Wait here,” Mason says to Ben.

Mason steps around the front counter and rips two of the beaded curtain wires off the ceiling. He returns to where the girl is still dancing, cowering from the pimp.

“Ah. You want to play,” the man says seeing Mason, “it’ll cost a bit extra, but you can play.”

The man offers Mason the cane but Mason ignores it. Instead he forces the pimp back against the stairway banister. The man does not resist, he thinks it is some kind of kinky game; he can get his kicks and still charge the stranger for it. But by the time the man realises it is not a game, it is too late, as Mason has secured his wrists to the banisters with the wired curtain beads.

“What you do?”

“You are one sick bastard,” Mason says, “you get your kicks hitting women? How old are these girls?”

The man laughs. His pride rearing like a trapped dog.

“They are old enough.”

“You are sick.”

“And yet you pay for sex, yes?” The man says.

The girl is watching from the corner of the room. Mason hands her the bamboo rod.

“Your turn.”

The switch in power is confusing for her. She stares at the cane before she focuses on the man struggling to free himself. This is the pimp who purchased her from a people smuggler and promised her a good and kind life in Australia. The man who beats her and ridicules her like an animal. She spits in his face and the cane makes a sharp slapping sound as it finds the soft skin of his thigh.

“Bitch. Bloody bitch,” the man grunts.

She starts to dance again. But there is something different in her movements. She does not stare at the floor. She studies her tormentor. She sways up close,

seductively, twisting and turning and spinning. She whips the man across the chest. She lashes his legs and arms.

“Whore,” he spits, “dirty whore—”

She cuts him across the face. Then she disappears inside a side room. The man glances at Mason.

“Please. I pay you any money. Please.”

Music suddenly emanates from the vacant room; Neil Diamond’s—*Woman*. The girl returns, swaying to the music, folding and unfolding like a curtain twisting in a breeze. Channeling her inner Mia Wallace, she has a knife now in one hand and the cane in the other. She shoves a sock into the man’s mouth and undoes the zipper of his pants. The pimp’s eyes are bulging.

*They never get tired of puttin’ me down  
And I never know when I come around...*

Mason has seen enough and he follows Ben out on to the street.

*Girl you’ll be a woman soon—bah bah bah b...*

\* \* \* \* \*

It is a slow day at the station. Officers catching up on paper work and online shopping as the intense heat keeps the criminals quiet outside.

“Kid. I need you to do something.”

Nate springs to attention.

“What? Where we going Chief?”

“Nowhere.”

Fitch spreads a large topographical map of the local area across Nate’s desk.

“I want you to gather every reported incident from this morning. No matter how insignificant; break and enter, assault, shoplifting, anything, just mark them on this map.”

Nate’s excitement evaporates. More paper shuffling.

“One of the lowies maybe chief?”

At least he is consistent.

“No, you.”

“Is this related to the bloke from this morning chief?” Nate asks.

“Maybe.”

Fitch returns to his office and sits staring out the window. In his mind he sees his brother armed and wandering dangerously around town. The risk to Mason and the public escalates every minute Mason is off his medication. Fitch has seen his brother go AWOL before, messing things and people up. But it is not Mason’s fault. It is the war that messed him up first. Fitch knows he must find Mason before things get truly messed up.

Fitch considers the few clues he has; Mason’s abandoned car, the sighting at the 7-Eleven, and what Mason said to the office receptionist on leaving this morning; “getting me job back”. But how does he get his job back? He is on public transport but where is he going?

Fitch’s mobile interrupts his thoughts. It is Linda.

“He’s gone. He’s taken him.”

Fitch closes his office door.

“Linda, slow down. Take a breath.”



But she just keeps crying into the phone.

“Mason took Ben out of school.”

Fitch feels the room closing in around him. A vice tightening around his brain.

“How do you know?”

“I called the school on the off chance. And they said Mason came to the front office asking for Ben. They turned him away because he is not a registered guardian. But when they checked for Ben later he was not there. Mason took him.”

Fitch sees his private investigation suddenly becoming very public.

“What did you say to them?”

“Nothing. They are still searching the school. They think he might be in the Art department.”

“That’s good Linda,” Fitch says.

“None of this is good Fitch. He’s got my son and he’s bloody crazy. He has not taken his medication.”

Fitch breathes deeply. Decision time. Does he keep kidding himself he can control the situation and find Mason, or does he hand things over to someone who is not personally attached. Neither choice is pretty; the first could be very bad for Fitch, the second will be very bad for Mason. But Mason is Fitch’s brother, so is there really a choice?

“Linda, listen to me. This is going to be hard but you have to trust me. I will get Ben back. But you need to tell the school that Ben has turned up at home and everything is alright.”

“No Fitch. I can’t, he’s missing, he’s with that crazy bastard.”

“And I will get him back,” Fitch says.

Linda is crying hysterically.

“Linda,” Fitch says, “if you do not do this, the school will call the police and a team of officers will go after Mason. He will be deemed to have kidnapped a minor. He will be listed as dangerous. They will make no allowances for his mental state. And Ben will be caught in the middle. Linda?”

“Yes,” her voice is withdrawn.

“Can you do what I said?”

“Ok Fitch,” she says slowly, “just get my son back. He is all I have. I don’t care what happens to his father. Just don’t let anything happen to my boy.”

Fitch hangs up and rocks back in his chair. The room that had been closing in around him feels like it is spinning now. Like he is being sucked down into a giant abyss.

His landline buzzes. It is Nate calling from his desk.

“Boss. Something just come in. Likely nothing but you wanted to...”

“What is it?”

“Some crazy ice addict caused some trouble at a medical practice in Kingswood today.”

“What kind of medical centre?”

“The funny kind. More Botox and fillers than thermometers and antibiotics.”

“The offender?”

“Bloody looney. Had a knife and gave the doctor a lesson on how to stitch up a laceration without anesthetic.”

“Get me the address.”

## Chapter 10

Everyone is a product in some way of their experiences. Just as Mason was not always a damaged returned soldier, Ben was similarly not always a child without a voice. Rewind five years to an incident inside his family home.

It is late evening but still light outside. There are kids riding skateboards on the street. Neighbours doing neighbourly things like cleaning cars and gutters and tending lawns. But beneath this serene visage, ten year old Ben Turner is cowering behind his mother inside their family home. Father, and husband, Mason Turner, is pacing in front of them. He is yelling and his voice carries out to the street but fails to alarm the neighbours. This is the domestic violence capital of Australia after all. You hear someone yelling, you just put in the ear phones and get on with the gardening.

Ben is crouched behind his mother; a lioness protecting her cub. Ben peaks out from behind her, watching the man he thought was his father, stalk around the room. His mother’s face is bloodied. She has taken the violence so that Ben might avoid it.

“You think I want this life,” Mason shouts, “you think I want any of this?”

“I don’t care,” his mother says, “you are not taking him.”

Because that is what Mason wants to do; take Ben out for the afternoon. But Mason is drunk and in the middle of one of his half in Afghanistan half in Sydney moments, where everyone is a potential enemy.

Mason ducks and peers out the window, suddenly alert. The enemy are gathering out there. Surrounding the place with their AK47’s and rocket propelled grenades.

“I never asked for any of this,” Mason yells.

“Neither did we.”

“But you don’t got these things clawing at your brain. Eating you up.”

“Get some help,” Linda counters.

“The help don’t help. Now I’m taking him out for a walk.”

Mason approaches them and Linda pushes him away. He stumbles into the wall. Mason steadies himself and suddenly there is a gun in his hand. It just kind of materialises out of nowhere. It is one of the few mementos Mason kept from his time in Afghanistan. Mason points the gun at her. She stares it down. She will do anything to keep Ben safe. But Mason sees her bloodied face, and Ben’s frightened eyes, and realises that this is not what he wants.

He turns the gun on himself.

“Take myself out. Is that what you want?”

Linda says nothing.

“Just blow myself away. Let you clean up the mess and get on with things.”

Mason is shouting, his delirium escalating.

“You don’t want me around anyway. Because I’m a bloody lunatic that don’t have no right to his own son. Cause...”

Mason keeps shouting. His face turning bright red. His gun hand shaking as he empties himself of all the injustices he has endured. And at the peak of his rage Mason’s voice fails and in the suddenly profound silence, there is an audible click.

There can be no mistake. There can be no second guessing.

Mason has done it but the gun has jammed. But the impact is the same as if he had fallen with the shot. He drops the gun and he slumps against the wall, his eyes wide with shock.

Linda is screaming and holding her son, shielding him and covering his eyes, but it is all too late. Ben is old enough to know what he heard and what he saw and what he should have seen. Ben’s ten year old brain processes it all.

He wants to talk but can’t.

And so Ben Turner becomes the latest collateral damage from the war on terror fought in the desert on the other side of the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

The airconditioning inside the train carriage has failed and it is stifling. Mason uses his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face. He is sitting beside Ben as the urban landscape rattles past outside.

“Well I bet they don’t teach you none of that at school do they kid.”

Mason nudges his son but Ben just keeps his head down staring at his pad. He is not drawing, just staring at a blank page. Mason senses Ben’s unease and realises his error. It was wrong to take his son into that place. What kind of father would do that? It was the drug withdrawals and the demons that made him do it.

“I’m sorry you had to see that son,” he says, “but it is some truth. Not some fake reality television. That is what this country has become.”

The train slows into a train station and Mason sees a billboard for the upcoming series of *The Real Housewives of Sydney*. A bunch of botoxed forty-something women with big hair and figure hugging dresses, looking daggers at each other.

“Now see that son,” Mason says indicating the advertisement, “sums up everything that is wrong with this country.”

Ben glances out the window.

“You see it everywhere kid. People obsessed with themselves. People wanting perfection but ruining each other trying to get it. People wanting peace but contributing nothing to make it happen because they’re too busy bitching and pretending to be something they’re not.”

Mason thinks he should stop but he can’t.

“I’ve got a name for it son, Generation GONE; Going Nowhere and Empty. Welcome to Generation GONE kid. Where your worth is measured by the size of your tits and your wallet and how many Facebook friends you have. Just bring your best fake tan and friends, and step right in; brains and morals optional. Hey did you know there’s a war going on in the Middle East, *yeah what? huh really? But hey check out my new nails and puppy on Instagram.*”

Ben tries to hide his smile.

“I’m ranting aren’t I son? But seriously those people have got more dollars than sense.”

Ben smothers his laugh.

“Was that a laugh kid?” Mason asks, “you feeling alright?”

Ben stoops lower over his pad but Mason can see his smile. It is the first time he has seen his son smile in years.

“You know I got the sack today son. Just gave me a letter and marched me out the door. That’s the thanks I get for defending this country.”

Mason shakes his head, staring out the window.

“But hey kid. We’re gonna get me job back. You and me. And no one is going to stand in our way.”

The train slows into Granville station.

“Got to get out here kid. Need a bloody drink.”

They exit into the heat once again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The gang file out of the train station. They swagger and sway and talk each other up as they walk.

“We be pissin’ and dissin’ this place.”

“You be the man—man.”

“You be a weapon.”

“I ain’t no weapon, you be the weapon.”

“Yeah a big bazooka.”

The adrenalin has crept back. And well it should. The red dot on the mobile tracking app has not moved for the last half hour. The MF, or the *OMF (Old MF)*, as they have labelled Mason, has stopped for—

“Lunch. OMF is getting himself some KFC,” Ring Leader says observing the gigantic red and white bucket sign at the end of the street.

“He likes chicken.”

“Gonna pluck him like a chicken.”

“Be squawkin’ like a chicken.”

“Gonna shoot that chicken in the butt.”

“Gonna bazooka that chicken’s arse.”

They laugh it up but get serious as they enter the restaurant. Walking tall, hands in pockets, checking the place out. A group of school kids eating at the back see them and avert their eyes. A couple of older girls see the make-believe gangsters, think it might be an extension of the earlier prank with the old guy and the gun, and try hard to conceal their laughter. The store manager has had trouble with this kind of riff-raff before and he stands close to the emergency alert button below the counter. Any trouble and the police arrive in five minutes. But a lot can happen in five minutes. A lot of shots can get fired in five minutes.

They separate, scoping out the downstairs and upstairs. Toilets. Car park. Drive-thru. Before regrouping outside.

“OMF ain’t here.”

“OMF been eatin’ then runnin’.”

Ringleader is unimpressed.

“Gimme your phone Gee.”

Three dollars is not much to pay for a satellite tracking GPS and you get what you pay for. The app works but it is not NASA standard and it freezes

intermittently. The OMF has been at the KFC but he's not there anymore. The red light is moving again; fast.

Ringleader glances across the road and sees the train line.

"He's on a train."

"OMF likes trains."

"We'd better be getting the train then Gee."

They bolt for the station, doing it tough in their bomber jackets in the heat. It has not occurred to them that the jackets worn by the gangs on America's East Coast are not all about looking cool and tough but more about keeping warm, because it is minuses most nights over there. Our wannabe Bad Boys should have switched channels to the COPS and bad boys on the US West Coast, just jeans and white t-shirts over there. But too late now.

The gang rush past a small brown door and no one notices the young woman step on to the street. Her face is flecked with blood like Halloween makeup. It accentuates her smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ironically, it is one of the failings of modern society that you can be caught in the middle of developed suburbia without access to a toilet. Even cavemen had that sorted with the communal shitpit. You went there for one thing and one thing only. But in the middle of Granville, waiting for a train in the heat, Mason is surrounded by hundreds of private toilets but none of them available to him. He decides to go caveman down a side alley.

It is cool in the shade as Mason pisses over the bags of rubbish. A door opens further down the lane and a head appears and then disappears; a business owner ensuring it is not an ice addict breaking into the place. Relieved, Mason and Ben turn to leave but two men stop them. They are big, both over six foot, and dressed in black.

"Excuse me gentleman," Mason makes to step around them.

They shift into his path.

"We want to show you something," one says.

Mason senses trouble. The gun, unfortunately, is in his brief case.

"Look mate," Mason soothes, "we just took a tinkle in your alley, no harm done yeah?"

A third man appears and together they herd Mason and Ben backwards.

"Won't take a minute," one of the men says.

Mason senses Ben's unease.

"It's ok son just do as they say."

Mason's mind goes all Afghanistan as he considers a way out of things.

The men open the same door the head appeared from earlier and usher them inside. Mason is momentarily blind as he shifts from bright sunlight to internal darkness, and he does not see the fist coming. It warps his jaw and his legs go slack.

The second punch puts him out cold.

## Chapter 11

When Mason comes to he thinks he is outside in the sunlight but once his eyes focus he realises he is indoors and what he thinks is the sun is really a bright overhead lamp. His hands are bound behind his back and his ankles are secured with masking tape. Ben is lying similarly bound beside him. Ben is panicking as he tries to free himself.

“Relax,” Mason says, “the more you struggle the more it will hurt.”

Ben stops struggling and stares at his father. There are tears in his eyes but he seems relieved that his father is conscious again. Mason feels the weight of responsibility. His son should be in school, instead he is on an unauthorised excursion, and bound up in some empty warehouse. Mason knows, that as the parent, he must find a way out.

The room is painted black with no windows. There are two doors; one has a thin strip of what appears to be sunlight at its base. Mason is sitting on a raised stage area and the wall behind him is covered by a black flag with Arabic writing. Similar flags are strung about the place. Arabic books are piled on a small table on the stage. In the centre of the room is a video camera on a tripod. And behind the camera is a man dressed in a black floor length shawl. The man’s face is covered by a black mask and he is holding a very long sword.

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig’s PA considers it her responsibility to look after both Craig’s diary and his wellbeing. And she is concerned for him. She has been screening his calls and watching him stare aimlessly out the window most of the day.

She enters his office and hands him a report.

“Are you alright Craig?”

He looks up and fakes a smile.

“Never better, why?”

“You don’t look good.”

“Looking good is overrated,” he says.

“Why don’t you go home Craig? Take the afternoon off.”

Craig considers the idea. He could go home and avoid what he does not yet know is coming for him. But what’s at home? Just more of the same. Get caught up in Mia’s crisis of the moment. Far better to stay in the office and pretend he is in control of things.

“If I’m not here,” he says sweeping his arm in a dramatic arc, “who’s going to look after all this?”

“It will survive without you,” she says.

That, Craig muses, is the truth.

“Can I get you anything?” she asks.

Craig considers the offer. Anything? A sandwich, a coffee, a... new life.

“No. I’m fine,” he says.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason recognises the white Arabic script from his time in the Middle East. And the flags are similar to those depicting Islamic militants on the news. Mason watches as the man behind the camera mutters into his mobile and hangs up.

The man continues to watch Mason and Ben in silence.

“What do you want?” Mason asks.

Silence.

“Let the boy go. Keep me.”

No response. Instead the man selects a book from beside the camera and starts reading aloud in Arabic. Mason does not understand the words but believes the man is praying.

“Better pray for a bodyguard you bastard. Because once I get out of this...”

The man keeps chanting, unperturbed, his words echoing in the enclosed space.

Mason recognises the scene. Filming executions was rife in Afghanistan and Iraq. Social media; YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, are the mouth pieces for militants to spread their propaganda around the globe. You can't get the people to the warzone you take the warzone to them. Because, Mason knows, like all the great struggles in history, the battle is fought in the field but ultimately won in the media and the minds of the masses. And Mason has seen first hand how *ISIS* (*FIBS* from here on, as there will be no free promotion in this book), have revolutionised the process of executions. Beheadings, stonings, cage drownings, mass hangings; an endless list on how to deliver death and misery, the more shocking and depraved the better. But *FIBS* have failed to consider the human conditioning response. That is, when you behead and stone and shoot enough people, the shock value is lost. What starts as barbaric and savage becomes alarmingly normal.

The internal door opens and two men walk in. They are dressed in black and have their faces covered; clones of the sword carrying cameraman.

“Allahu Akbar.”

“Allahu Akbar.”

They stand either side of the man with the video camera and watch Mason and Ben in silence.

They're waiting, Mason thinks. For what? For who?

“Let the boy go,” Mason says again, “he cannot identify you.”

Silence, just the incessant ticking of the wall mounted clock and the hum of traffic outside. The sounds remind Mason that society and people are just outside the door. His military mind is working quickly, picking apart ambush and hostage situations in Afghanistan. He knows his best weapon is time. The more time he can create, the better the chance of escape.

The door opens again and another man enters. Dressed in black with his face covered by a balaclava, he moves purposefully across the room.

“Allahu Akbar.”

“Allahu Akbar.”

The new arrival approaches Mason. The man is clearly a leader of sorts and he lifts Mason's chin with the point of the gun he pulls from beneath his shawl.

“Do you know what this is?” the man asks, his voice distorted by the balaclava.

“Play School?” Mason replies.

“This,” the man continues unperturbed, “is retribution.”

*Bullshit.* Mason knows what this is. It is a copycat call to arms. It is a bunch of wannabe jihadists mimicking what they've seen on the Internet. It has no place in Sydney. It has no place anywhere. But he knows he must keep his captor talking so he can determine a way out of things.

"Retribution for what?"

"There is a global war."

"Really," Mason raises his eyebrows, "when did that start?"

"When the infidels invaded our sacred lands. The Americans and their lackey allies including Australia, Canada, Britain, France. Invading our sacred homelands of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. The American dogs seducing Israel."

"Really," Mason says, "when did all that happen?"

The irony is not lost on Mason. If only his captor knew the truth. That he had been on the frontline with these dreaded infidels. Fighting right up to the Syrian and Iraq borders. Ridding Afghanistan of this man's make-believe Taliban buddies.

"You will be a message," the man continues, "your death is a minor sacrifice in the eternal war. Allahu is great."

"Why him?" Mason says, indicating Ben, "he is just a boy. Keep me but let him go."

"Why? When your people kill the women and children in our homelands."

*Homelands?* Mason thinks. This man has an Australian accent, a pair of *Nike* shoes beneath his black dress and gold rings on his fingers. What connection does he have to the people in the Middle East? And the eternal war is the one he has read about in make-believe Internet propaganda.

"Let him go," Mason presses.

"What's wrong with him?" the man asks.

"Nothing."

"He doesn't speak."

"Maybe but he still makes more sense than you do," Mason says, "let him go."

"Why? When you support the scourge that lays waste to our homelands. When you support the dirty American pigs. You..."

"Look," Mason cuts him off, "I don't support no one other than the Wests Tigers on Sunday. And how does this mindless bullshit help?"

"Our cause will never end. Our war is eternal and universal."

Ah, really? A war that never ends. Rewind shall we, Mason thinks, to—*nuke the Middle East.*

"Sounds like a waste of time then," Mason retorts.

"Your deaths will be an example to others. The way of Islam shall be universal. The war will rid the world of the infidels and non believers. They shall be crushed. Allahu Akbar!"

Mason knows the man is just parroting the words of faceless antagonists on the Internet. It is a grandstand speech but no one is at the game to listen. And Mason will not become the headless fodder for the FIBS propaganda machine. He's working his hands against his bindings. They give a little, but not enough. He senses his window for escape is closing.

"Look, I'm sorry for interrupting your FIBS Tupperware party, but if you would just—"

The man punches Mason in the face.



“Shut up pig. You take issue with FIBS, when the American pigs are bombing innocent people in the Middle East?”

“I don’t have a problem with anyone,” Mason says, “I have a problem with people cutting off innocent people’s heads. I dislike women being stoned by men. I dislike men forcing children to murder innocent people.”

The man pauses and Mason can tell from his eyes that he is smiling beneath his balaclava.

“A typical Western response. When the West have bombed and killed countless families in the Middle East. Today you will become a symbol of the power of FIBS. Proof that FIBS can strike anywhere at any time.”

The man barks something in Arabic and one of his cloaked offsideers steps forward and offers the sword to his superior. The leader sets his gun down on the stage and takes the sword. The cameraman straightens the tripod and checks the images on the connected laptop.

“Your death will be streamed live to the masses,” the leader says, “you will be a celebrity. A reality superstar, like the Kardashians. Your boy will watch you die first and then he will die too.”

The man behind the camera nods to his superior who bows to the camera.

“We are ready. Allahu Akbar!”

“Allahu Akbar,” the men in the room echo.

The executioner steps into frame behind Mason and lifts him by the hair forcing him to stare at the camera. The man reads in Arabic from one of the books and points at Mason and Ben.

Mason considers the irony of things. How he spent years of his life dodging the Taliban and suicide bombers in Afghanistan, only to encounter a bunch of try-hard jihadist foot soldiers in Australia. Really? What are the odds? But this is not the way it is meant to end. He glances at Ben. The boy is crying and shaking. Mason winks and smiles at his son. Then he stares defiantly at the camera.

The man’s words become increasingly animated. He slaps his chest and points to the flag on the wall behind him. He shakes Mason by the hair. He punctuates each sentence with a clenched fist. Then he slaps the book closed and sets it on the floor. He raises the sword in a wide arc, the blade flaring wickedly beneath the stark light.

“Allahu Akbar. God is great.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch has been working non-stop to track down his brother. Fitch knows the danger. He has visions of Mason getting lost and violent. But where does Fitch turn. He has exhausted all his leads. He has interviewed the now famous 7-Eleven attendants and asked them about what went down.

*With the criminals?*

No, the customer that was in the store at the time.

*There was someone else in the store?*

Dead end.

He dropped in on the Kingston medical centre. The ghostlike faces of the Doctor and Receptionist barely budged as they described the lunatic with the knife.

Did he say where he was going?

*No, why would he?*

Yes, well, right, why would he?

The gnawing uneasiness in Fitch's stomach has become a constant ache. Time is running out. His head hurts. His entire body seems to be drawn tight like a spring. He could share the load and engage more officers but that would mean describing the nature of the matter.

*And Fitch, what is your interest in this case?*

*Ah well... next question please.*

With nowhere else to turn Fitch calls home. Not for strategic guidance but because he just needs to talk. He feels weak doing it. But he needs to get things out. To relieve some of the stress. There was a time where they told each other everything. But he rarely talks to his wife now. Even as he calls he considers the sad reality of his and her lives. She sleeps all day, he buries his head in his work all day. She is alive but what kind of life does she have, and likewise himself.

The phone rings out and Fitch hangs up.

He stares out his window. The wind is up, stirring the litter and leaves in the car park. When in doubt, he muses, head back to the start. Everything and everyone starts from somewhere. He gets his hat and keys and finds Nate.

"Come on kid. We got some work to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

The blade sweeps down and—

Strikes the wooden stage inches from Mason's head, as the would-be executioner falls clutching a knife that is suddenly embedded in his leg. Mason, his hands somehow free, rolls across the stage and claims the gun the man had set down earlier. The two minders rush forward but Mason rolls and shoots. One of the men falls, his left leg ruined. The other stops and puts his gun down and backs up, before rushing out of the room, closely followed by the cameraman.

Mason stoops beside the man who's moaning and trying to remove the knife from his leg. Blood is pooling over the stage, staining the discarded books.

"Didn't see that one coming did you?" Mason says.

The group were amateurs. All tough in their black balaclavas and with their big badarse sword. But the whole exercise was a hack job. Mason's escape seems very Houdini like but it was all too simple. The thugs had bound Mason's arms too high and by twisting and maneuvering his wrists he was able to contort his hands free. And compounding their failure, the men had not bothered to search Mason for weapons. But really why would they? Mason was just some random unarmed civilian on the street. I mean what are the odds of randomly abducting a returned Afghanistan veteran with a knife? But it cost them big time as they overlooked the knife Mason had tucked into his sock.

"Let me help you."

The man screams as Mason rips the knife free. Then Mason cuts his own ankle bindings and frees Ben. Ben cowers against the wall.

"It is alright son."

Then Mason steps down from the stage and picks up the gun that the shot man has dropped. He hands it to Ben.

"Watch that one. If he moves, shoot him."

Mason then approaches the camera and laptop and confirms it is still streaming live pictures. He adjusts the camera slightly so that it is trained on the injured man on the stage. Then he returns to the stage and picks up the sword. He uses the blade to lift the man's chin.

"Smile," Mason says, "the world is watching."

"No. Please." The man's voice is a pathetic whine.

Mason places the blade at the back of the man's neck, measuring his strike.

"No please. No. I don't want to die."

Tears pour from the man's eyes, catching in his balaclava. Mason addresses the camera.

"This man asks you to die for him. When he is afraid of dying himself."

The man keeps moaning. Muttering in a mix of Arabic and English.

"Hardly a glowing endorsement for the product."

"Save it," Mason says, "I'm not about to kill you. That's not how we do things here. Besides, unfortunately, you are better off alive."

Mason sets the sword down and approaches Ben.

"Let's get out of here son."

They start for the door but Mason pauses and returns. He unmask his attacker and recoils like he has been stung. Expecting a man, he sees a kid barely thirteen years old.

## Chapter 12

"This is crazy boss. What are we looking for?" Nate moans.

Fitch and Nate are back at Mason's workplace where productivity is at an all time low. One visit from the cops is exciting, two visits in the same day, and there is definitely something going down.

"Anything that tells us where our man went," Fitch answers.

Fitch provided Nate some further details on the drive over. Their man was a returned military serviceman. Mentally unstable, a history of violence, and likely upset about being sacked. He is dependent on medication and left the office without it today.

"You know him chief?"

Nate might be a Lowie but he is no dumbie.

"Reckon we should hand this over to someone else Chief?"

"You can go back to the station if you like kid."

Nate shuts up. Being out and about, even in the heat, is better than pushing paper back at the station.

They rifle through Mason's drawers again. Recycled paper box. Bin beside his desk. Shelves and filing cabinet. More questions for the office manager and the woman on reception. But the search reveals no further clues. One of the office big noses sticks his into their search.

"What's up gentlemen, did this bloke go postal somewhere? Bloke was a frigging weirdo."

Fitch gets up in the man's face.

"What did you say?"

The man is stunned. This is a police officer right? Meant to be keeping the peace not destroying it? But the whole office is watching so he holds his ground.

"Bloke was crazy. Everyone knew it."

Fitch's anger gets away from him. He pushes the man back and he crashes into the desk behind him.

"And who made you the judge and jury, asshole? And if he does get himself a gun, here's hoping he takes you out first. Piss off back to work."

Nate eases Fitch back.

"Take it easy Chief," and then to the office antagonist, "you heard him, get back to work."

The bloke picks himself up and walks away, muttering about police brutality and hidden cameras.

"You alright chief?" Nate asks, putting his hand on Fitch's shoulder.

Fitch breathes hard. The anger had been building throughout the day. For Months. Years. And on many fronts. Mason's disappearance is the trigger that sets it off. Fitch smoothes out his shirt.

"I'm good."

"Don't look good chief."

"And you're a doctor now? Shut up and contact the IT department," Fitch instructs, "dig up this man's PC history. Internet searches, email, phone calls. Anything that might tell us where he went."

Nate senses Fitch's desperation.

"Why is this important to you Chief?"

Fitch has asked himself the same question. Why is he sticking his neck out for Mason? Mason is old enough to look after himself. Mason can make and manage his own choices. And what about Fitch's oath as a police officer, to protect and serve the community? But the community made Mason what he is, so let the community deal with what it created.

But it is not about protecting the community from Mason, it is about protecting Mason from the community.

"I don't know," Fitch says and leaves Nate to contact the IT department.

\* \* \* \* \*

A train bound for the city. The passengers are hot and bothered and silent as they stare out the windows. Mason can feel Ben shaking beside him.

"Now kid, you can't let that worry you."

But even as he says it, Mason realises the absurdity of his words. His son has just watched his father come inches away from decapitation, as an entrée to his own similar execution. Ben pulls out his drawing pad and starts sketching. But he is scribbling, merely seeking comfort from the familiarity of the pen and paper.

"I feel for you kid. I feel for your generation. I mean why would a bunch of teenage kids, that have the spoils of this country and no cause to feel aggrieved, imitate a bunch of madmen on the Internet?"

Ben has stopped drawing. He hunches over the pad in his lap, staring at his hand like he is still holding the gun.

Mason puts his arm around his son's shoulders. Ben leans into him. Mason realises that Ben is crying. His son's body heaves with the silent tears. Mason ruffles his son's hair and holds him tight. He rests his chin on Ben's head.

"Don't worry kid. We'll restore some order. Gonna get ourselves some respect. Gonna get me job back."

The train slows into Wynyard and they disembark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason's FIBS encounter has gone viral. Viewers are calling it a no holds barred, no quarter given, FIBS butt-kicking.

*Hey did you see this...click*

*Like check this out bro...click*

*Like Conor McGregor on steroids...click*

*Like FIBS just got butt whipped...click*

*We got a Black FIBS down, we got a Black FIBS down – anyone got a de-FIB-ulator...click*

*Like, LOL...click*

Ironically the FIBS perpetrators had been seeking just this kind of viral sensation. Their lone wolf execution was being streamed live to subscribers of an underground extremism website but certain rouge dissidents took the footage mainstream. And good luck stopping the *Facebook Youtube Twitter (Fubeitter)* express after that.

The backyard video detectives, the self anointed vigilantes against all things fake on the Internet, have run their tests for photo/video shopping (warped images, shadows the wrong way, disconnected audio and visual) and certified the video legit. And with authenticity comes credibility and the "Likes" just keep mounting up. School kids, office workers, mums and dads, give the video the thumbs up and flick it on.

*A one man FIBS butt-kicking machine—click.*

*WTF—click.*

*Forget the coalition of the willing, hire this guy—click.*

Some insomniacs in the United States even pick it up in the wee hours of the night.

*Hey check out what some bloke did Down Under—click.*

*Yeah that's why we want those Aussies with us not against us—click.*

*Yeah can't have those Aussies slipping into bed with Beijing—click.*

*Maybe this guy's got something to say about the Chinese building all those islands in the South China Sea.—click.*

*Click—click—click—click—click.*

If FIBS had a legitimate corporate identity they'd be calling in the lawyers, because they're suffering some serious brand damage.

And Mason has become an Internet sensation. A modern age Butch Cassidy. A new age John McClane. A real life Indiana Jones toppling the FIBS Temple of Doom. Adults want to meet him and kids want to be him. Social commentators, as always, debate the morality of things.

*But he pulled the gun on FIBS.*

*Only after they pulled the sword on him.*

*He terrorised the terrorists, which makes him a terrorist.  
No that makes him a pacifist.  
Still a terrorist.  
A pacifist terrorist—like LOL.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch has the map Nate marked up earlier with the day's incidents spread over his office desk. A dot to dot of all things violent and wrong with society. But there is no pattern in the madness. No clue as to what comes next.

Several witnesses have described a fifty-something male matching Mason's appearance; height, hair colour, erratic behaviour. Fitch has marked the confirmed and likely sightings of Mason with red dots. He traces a path with his finger from the abandoned car at Emu Plains train station, to a fight on the train between Kingston and St Marys, Kingston medical centre, the 7-Eleven—scene of the great heist that wasn't, and Ben's school in Doonside.

He is using the train but where is he going?

*You abduct your son—then where do you go?*

*Home? Your ex-wife's place? Out of town? Run for the hills? But the hills are on fire.*

*Getting me job back.*

Fitch knows the words are somehow significant. What job? Current job? Does he mean the military?

Fitch's desk phone distracts him.

It is Nate. He is excited, like he's got something that is going to blow his boss' socks off.

"Shoot kid."

"I got our man's PC records like you said Chief. Some aimless google searching and random work related emails, all real harmless, until his last activity, pulling up the CEO, the Big Cheese's, profile on the office intranet. Name, address, phone number. He printed it boss. I checked the printer and it wasn't left behind. I reckon he took it with him chief."

"Where's the CEO's office?"

"City."

Things suddenly make sense. And like any well hidden puzzle, it looks so obvious to Fitch now that the solution had been laid bare.

*He's on the train heading for the city. He's going to get his job back from the CEO who took it from him.*

"Chief? You there? You're going after him aren't you Chief," Nate says, concerned by Fitch's silence, "I'm coming with you. Come and get me. Fitch. Fitch—"

Fitch hangs up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Policing is ten percent fact and evidence and ninety percent gut feel. And right now, Sergeant Fitch has a gut ache he cannot ignore as he speeds through the Penrith backstreets headed for the M4 motorway that will sweep him like a magic carpet into the CBD.

But he has a choice to make.

Does he stay on the case or hand it over?

The policing handbook says hand it over. His moral compass says hand it over. Everything he was ever taught tells him to hand it over to someone unattached to things. Personal interest can cloud your judgement and get people hurt.

*So just hand it over.*

But other officers will not understand Mason's medical condition. They will come in heavy handed. And Mason will not go quietly. Handing it over would be synonymous with abandoning his brother.

Choice two. Nate—in or out?

Fitch's gut says keep the kid out of it. Memories of what happened this day twenty years ago press at his conscience. The young officer taking both barrels from a madmen's shotgun, but Fitch harbours a crazy belief that he might somehow redeem himself. Like taming the horse that just bucked him off. Fitch could let the kid in, keep him safe, just to prove that he can.

Choices. Life is full of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

They stalk through Wynyard Station in their too heavy, too hot, bomber jackets. The Bad Boys of the West on excursion, or incursion, to the East. The tide of suits swarming in the opposite direction part like Moses' Red Sea giving the Bad Boys a wide berth. It is the evening peak hour and people are rushing home to their televisions. They'll keep one eye on *The Bachelor*, and the other on the developing story of the crazy armed terrorist on the loose in Sydney.

The Bad Boys pause and gather around the mobile. The red dot is stationary and they look around. The OMF is here somewhere. And this time there is no issue with the cheap GPS freezing. They see their target entering a convenience store, leaving a kid sitting outside with a book.

"That'd be our OMF."

"He be stopped."

"He be dead."

"Put a cap in his arse."

They, like the rest of the world, heard this once on Cops and liked it, so it stuck.

"Put a double cap in his arse."

Now that is taking some license.

They hurdle the ticket turnstiles; the Bad Boys in New York don't buy no train tickets; *tickets would be a tax on the poor yeah, Gee.*

The leader pulls them together, however, before they start something they can't stop. He tames the bluster with some reality.

"He'd be mean. He knows how to fight. Be good with his fists. We take him together yeah?"

They knock knuckles and swagger up to the store. Hands inside their jackets, they've come prepared this time. They're carrying. Guns and knives and one of them intends to go all Chuck Norris, with a set of metal nunchaku he picked up from a cheap military disposal store.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nate is outside in the car park. It is late afternoon and the wind has swept the smoke from the fires across the sky like spilt ink. The sun has turned stark red behind the grey veil. The beast from the West is coming to devour the East.

Nate knows that Fitch won't come. Fitch does not need a newbie getting in the way.

*Why would he...*

Fitch's patrol car streaks into the parking lot.

"Get in kid," Fitch says through the open window.

Nate does and Fitch gets the car back on the road.

"Where we going Chief?" Nate is buzzing.

"City."

"You reckon our man's going after the big boss?"

Fitch doesn't reply. He keeps his eyes on the road as the police radio lights up with reports of a terrorist on the loose in Sydney.

## Chapter 13

The police are slow in picking up the Mason vs FIBS footage, but once they have it, they move quickly. They track the IP address of the offending PC to a warehouse in Granville. A counter terrorism unit raids the place; Kevlar bullet proof vests, automatic assault rifles, riot gear and all the rest; Robocops come for the Robojihadists. Except the Robojihadists have cleared out leaving an abandoned blood splattered suburban cave. But the police get their men soon after at Westmead hospital. Two men presenting with gunshot wounds from a hunting trip gone wrong, was too farfetched a story for the emergency staff to digest.

But Mason is the one the police want. They see beyond the glorified vigilante angle. They see a madman with a gun and a young hostage. They do the ring around and door knock of the local residents and businesses. Someone saw this and someone saw that but the truth is no one saw anything. But the CCTV camera footage from Granville train station saw Australia's newest reality star getting on the 17:30 city bound train carrying a briefcase and leading a young kid with a book.

The real prize though, comes in the form of a phone call. A distressed woman claiming to be the ex of Australia's most wanted man.

*Go on. We're listening.*

She tells them everything; name, age, military history and tendency for violence. She tells them that Mason has abducted her son and the seemingly minor detail of how she is the sister-in-law of Fitch Turner, Sergeant of the Penrith police branch, and that Sergeant Fitch has been after his brother Mason Turner since mid-morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Don't ever let the facts get in the way of a good story.*

*Print the headline before the commentary.*

*Facts don't sell stories—stories sell stories.*



And so is the media's approach to Sydney's potential terrorist. Newsrooms around Sydney pick up the story and run with it. As next to natural disasters, terrorism related incidents are pure media gold. The *Fubeitter* train has left the station and anybody who's anybody, has to be on it. The public want to know who this man is and what he wants. And the media is going to tell them, with or without the facts.

Journalists gather what they can from the Internet and from scanning the police radio channels. They get a name, Mason Turner, but the rest is all very sketchy. But pretty soon what started as Mason Turner—FIBS' worst nightmare, becomes Mason Turner the radicalised Islamic sympathiser. A FIBS insider and defector. You see, what happened in the warehouse was the culmination of a power struggle in the FIBS hierarchy. Mason Turner wanted control. It was a clash over how to coordinate the group's next terrorist attack. Mason wanted it his way. He got it his way.

Unsubstantiated sightings come in from people having seen this man acting suspiciously around prominent Sydney landmarks in the past days. People call claiming to know him. And they describe a distant and violent individual. Counter terrorism experts run the standard psychology checklist over him and conclude he fits the lone wolf terrorist profile. And then there is the military history. The bloke served in Afghanistan in the military explosives unit.

*Did someone say explosives?*

The *Fubeitter* train is moving so fast it risks derailing as people take the news into their own hands. Facts and updates get texted and tweeted and Instagrammed. Reports of bombs planted around Sydney. Unattended bags left outside popular CBD meeting points. Strange men lurking on crowded train platforms.

Maybe our man is not working alone.

Each half-truth spawns a thousand more. The unsubstantiated snippets become fact. It is real time news creation in the hands of the masses; created by the public for the public. And the public go mad for the dissident FIBS insider angle.

*A homegrown Afghan inspired jihadist holding a young boy hostage.*

The reality has been pushed and pulled and twisted in so many directions that who knows what's true.

But does that really matter?

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason recognises them immediately, it isn't hard, dumbarse bomber jackets and hats the wrong way around. Three of them have trapped him inside the store and two more stand over Ben outside.

"Remember us?"

Mason screws up his face struggling to recall.

"Let me see. Ip, Dip and Dogshit."

"We're going to mess you up."

"Yeah, mess you up."

"Big time mess you up."

Mason considers the echoed threat. His gun and knife are inside the brief case he left with Ben. And he knows his antagonists have got some hardware inside their jackets.

“Look,” Mason says, “I know we got off on the wrong foot this morning but I’ve had a bloody ordinary afternoon. So why don’t we just...”

“We’re gonna kick your bitchy arse bitch.”

“You mess with us in our hood we always be finding you.”

Mason watches their eyes. He has seen the scattered vagueness of Afghanistan suicide bombers, young men who have surrendered everything in preparation for the otherside. But in these young men he sees fear.

“Well you found me alright,” Mason laughs, “but we’re a long way from your hood. Will you find your way home alright?”

“This bitch would be lookin’ for a kickin’.”

“Yeah, this bitch be thinkin’ he’s funny but he be cryin’ soon.”

They close in and Mason backs up a step. He does not want another fight. He is done with fighting. And he has things to do.

“I’m getting me job back,” he says, “nothin’ else. Just getting me job back.”

“You be getting messed up mista is what you be gettin’.”

The fist is a blur and it knocks Mason sideways into the confectionary impulse stand. Mars bars and M&Ms and Tic Tacs scatter across the floor. The young woman behind the counter screams. People outside see what is happening and quickly keep walking. There is no time to waste, *The Bachelor* starts soon. A boot rocks Mason’s head, another mashes his mouth. He sees stars and six assailants where a moment ago there were three.

“Gonna mess you up man,” the leader taunts.

Mason’s head snaps back. He spits blood on to the floor. He can see Ben wrestling with the two gang members outside, desperate to get in and help him. Mason starts to stand but a gun appears centimetres from his face.

“You got something to say now,” Ring Leader’s face leers behind the gun.

Mason knows the kid is crazy enough to do it. Put that cap, or whatever he calls it, into his head. Anything to recapture his tattered pride. But the kid is unsure how to do it. His LA and NYC COPS education never covered the shooting part. The show always started after the shooting had gone down and the cops were coming after the bad boys. And what had seemed so simple, just point and shoot, suddenly seems very hard.

Big mistake. Big Big mistake. Never pull a gun unless you intend to use it.

The kid keeps talking, buying himself time.

“Look the pig MF ain’t got nothing to say.”

One of the others spits in Mason’s face and the metal nunchaku tinkle like wind chimes in his hands.

“He’s a pissin’ in his wissin’.”

“He’s a crackin’ in his whackin’.”

The dialogue is lyrical but irrelevant. Mason sees Ben’s face shoved against the store window, his arm twisted up behind his back. That is his boy out there. It strengthens his resolve.

Ringleader doesn’t see it coming. The curled up MF on the floor is suddenly Jean-Claude Van Damme again. Mason lunges at the gun and directs it away from

his face before swiping the kid's legs from under him. The gun discharges, punching a hole in the ceiling. Mason lays the kid out with an elbow and turns to face—

Another gun. The second kid is a quick learner; pull gun and shoot. The boom rattles the store window as Mason ducks and there is a groan and a gasp like a deflating car tyre, as the kid behind Mason falls with the bullet. The kid that did the shooting looks down at his mate bleeding on the floor. The horror sets in and he bolts from the store.

Ring Leader starts to get up but Mason places the kid's own gun against his forehead.

"Something to say dickhead, speak into the microphone."

Ringleader is mute. The *Braveheart* speech of a couple of hours ago seems like a different world. The kid has forgotten all about revenge and pride, leave that to the real Bad Boys in NYC and LA. The kid is petrified. He has seen what a bullet has done to his friend.

"Come on," Mason taunts, "say something. You've got the floor. Give us all some more of that homie dribble."

The girl behind the counter is screaming again. Mason's hand is twitching. He feels himself slipping into the bad place. He sees a stubborn Taliban insurgent refusing to talk. Shoot him. Set an example. Shoot one and the others talk like parrots. Get... Mason blinks the madness away and lowers the gun as the kid crawls toward the door.

"That's it. Get out of here."

Ringleader does. Doesn't even bother to check on his dying mate. Just bolts out of the shop toward the train ticket turnstiles.

*Bad Boys, Bad boys*, ain't so bad after all.

Mason kneels beside the shot kid. Blood has spread like spilt wine over the white floor. The nunchaku he intended to use on Mason lay beside him like limp chopsticks. The kid's eyes are shifting and frantic. He is fighting for breath. Mason lifts the kid's shirt and sees the hole in his chest and knows the truth. He is about to apply pressure to the wound but the kid's breathing abruptly stops and he lays still.

The cashier's screaming suddenly seems so much louder.

"Will you shut up? Show this kid some dignity at least," Mason snaps before rejoining Ben outside where he is curled up against the glass shopfront. Mason helps him up.

"You alright son."

Ben nods. Mason can't forget what he saw earlier.

"You were comin' to defend your old man, weren't you son?"

Ben nods.

"That's good kid. You and me versus..."

Who? Versus what? The world? Society? Everyone?

But this is not Ben's war. What beef does a fifteen year old kid have with anyone? Mason picks up Ben's sketch book and hands it to him.

"We got to go kid. Get me job back."

They exit the underground on to George Street. Behind them, the shop assistant pulls herself together enough to call the police. She describes the fight, and the gun, and the dead kid whose blood is all over her shop floor.

*And who did all this?*

She describes the crazy white man with a brief case and a kid.

## Chapter 14

The police radio is alive with frantic reports of the suspected terrorist.

*Six foot. Dark hair. Office attire. With an abducted minor, fifteen years, brown hair.*

*Travelling on public transport.*

*Armed and dangerous.*

*Shot up a couple of bad guys in a Granville warehouse.*

*Suspected terrorist links to FIBS.*

*Brief case is likely loaded with explosives.*

Fitch knows it is Mason but the description is all wrong. Mason is not a terrorist. And dealt with properly he is not dangerous. The lies strengthen his desire to find and save his brother.

“That our man, Chief?” Nate asks.

Fitch does not reply.

“He’s got a kid with him Chief. We should call this in.”

Silence.

“A terrorist,” Nate says, “that’s...”

“He’s not a terrorist!” Fitch snaps, “bloody community are the terrorists. The government and people that trained him and used him to fight their wars are the terrorists. They screwed my brother up. They...”

Fitch trails off, realising he has said too much. Nate stares at him.

“I can drop you off here,” Fitch says.

Nate shakes his head. There is no way he is being dropped off anywhere. He is as loyal as a Labrador puppy. Would follow his boss into a raging inferno.

“You got a plan Chief?”

“I’m working on it.”

Fitch knows the station is looking for him. Linda will have cracked and told them everything. It is her only son in danger. Fitch knows, no matter how this ends, his career is over. Golden rule of the force, don’t get personal with your work. You get too close, you get hurt, or sacked, or both. But how do you walk away from your brother?

Fitch kicks the question around his brain. Why is he sticking his neck out for Mason?

*Because everyone deserves saving.*

*Too simple.*

*Because he is my brother.*

*Obviously.*

*Because Mason did not bring this on himself, society brought this on Mason.*

Sounds profound but really?

The truth evades Fitch and he has to concentrate as he enters the traffic clogged streets of the Sydney CBD. But if Fitch had more time to complete his conscience cleansing D&M he might have settled on the following rationale.

Fitch was sticking his neck out for Mason Turner because there was a bit of Mason Turner in Fitch Turner. Save Mason and Fitch might just save himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

The church of St Patrick is wedged between two office towers like a boulder stuck between two cliffs. The alcove provides an eerie refuge from the hustle and noise of the city. Moss covered sandstone rises to a distant white cross, that seems to float amid the modern city skyline.

Mason sits on a bench. His stitches split in the fight and Ben, a mute nurse, is tending the wound with a bandage he stole from a pharmacy.

“Just a scratch,” Mason says, eager to get moving again.

Mason assesses the church. Like the final fibro shack in the path of a modern motorway, it refused to budge so the city grew up around it. Mason considers it symbolic of religion’s place in modern society.

Ben ties the bandage off.

“Not bad son,” Mason assesses the dressing, “could have used you in Afghanistan.”

Ben smiles.

“What a day hey?” Mason says, “sure beats Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, don’t it.”

Ben laughs despite himself.

“Don’t want to be laughing like that too often kid, you might make a habit of it.”

Ben hides his face but Mason can see he is still smiling. He likes the change.

“Now just what have you been drawing all day son?”

Mason flicks through Ben’s sketch book and settles on a vivid image of a sink hole. There is a man teetering on the edge, clinging desperately to a young boy’s outstretched hand who in turn clings to a fence post. Bystanders laugh and point and go about their business. The strokes and shades of Ben’s pencil have given the picture a lifelike quality.

“It’s good kid,” Mason says, “can’t speak but you can bloody draw alright.”

Ben hides his face.

“There you go smiling again son.”

Mason pulls a sequence of contorted dopey faces and Ben laughs, slowly at first, before losing control. It is a sound Mason thought he would never hear again. It reminds him of what he lost for so long.

“I wasn’t much of a father, was I kid?” Mason says, “I mean what kind of father would do the things I did to you and your Mum?”

Ben stares at him and Mason forces himself to hold Ben’s eye.

“Beating up you and your mum. Pullin’ a gun. I scare you so bad that you don’t talk for five years. I destroyed what should have been the best years of your life.”

Mason’s voice catches but he forces himself to continue.

“I wasted me time fighting a bunch of terrorists on the other side of the world, when I could have been spending my time with you. But I read every one of your

letters when I was over there son. Was just countin' down the days until I got to see you. But when I do I'm so messed up I turn on the only two people who ever cared about me. I know it don't mean much but I'm sorry kid."

Mason feels the sting in his eyes and hides his face. He does not want Ben to see him like this. But he feels a hand on his shoulder and looks up. Ben smiles and offers his hand, helping his father up.

"Promise me one thing kid," Mason says picking up his briefcase, "promise me you won't ever turn out like me."

Ben mimics one of Mason's earlier twisted faces. Mason laughs despite himself.

"Come on kid, we got one more thing to do. We're getting me job back."

They step out of the shadow of the church and into the bustle of the city.

\* \* \* \* \*

There is ash in the air, tiny flakes, that drift like black snow. It smells like the city is on fire. The Big Smoke is smoking. As the fires of the West infiltrate the East.

"This is it son," Mason announces as they enter a flashy office tower foyer.

The inside is all marble and steel trimmings, and ice cold. Plush leather seats, mahogany book table, thick woolen rug, and ominously, a security desk screening everyone entering the building.

Mason presents what should be his terminated Penrith office ID.

"And you are here to see?" the security officer asks.

"Patricia Noble, of Southern Cross Building Materials. Thirtieth floor."

Mason has no intention of visiting the woman, she just works on the same floor as the Company's CEO. It will get him in the office and he can find his way from there.

The security officer looks from the Mason on the security pass to the Mason in front of him, taps his keyboard and glances at his screen. For Mason it is a punt on the efficiency, or not, of his former company's termination processes. How quickly can Mason the Procurement Manager become *Mason who?* in the Company's employee database.

The security officer frowns.

"It seems I cannot find you in our database."

"Strange. Would you mind trying again?"

Mason has the gun in his pocket. He has come this far. The easy way and the hard way.

"Ah," the man smiles, "my mistake. I had you misspelt, now I have you. Should I call ahead for you?"

"No," Mason says, "I know the way."

Mason takes the offered visitor access pass, and in so doing signs the termination papers for the Heads of all things IT and Human Resources; *so explain to me again Mr IT and Mr P&C how, eight hours after being terminated, a former employee, who just happens to be an on the run terrorist, was able to use his still valid work pass to access the Sydney office?* Good luck talking your way out of that one gentlemen.

Mason enters the lift with Ben. A young man with his tie hanging loose rushes in as the doors are closing.

“Bloody awful day,” the man says, “smoke everywhere.”

Mason nods.

“You seen the cricket?” the man asks, “none for a hundred and then the Poms roll us for a hundred and fifty.”

Mason keeps nodding.

“Fires in the mountains. Poms flogging us in the cricket. World’s bloody ending. Oh, and they say Donald Trump is gonna run for US President—he’s gonna make America great again or something. Like, really.”

*Yeah. Like really.*

“That ain’t the half of it,” Mason says, as he and Ben exit on the thirtieth floor.

## Chapter 15

It is time.

She has been speaking to a doctor friend who knows people, who knows people, who know how to—

Make death happen.

The cultured term for it is self euthanasia. Opponents call it suicide. The religious call it sinful. Governments call it difficult. But it is a simple debate made complex. At the heart of it is each human’s right to live, or die.

Choices. Life, and death, are full of them.

The act of self euthanasia is illegal in most parts of Australia. The illegality means little to the person dying, *what are you going to do, arrest me after I’m gone?* But it means something to those that facilitate the process. Hence the dying are forced into the indignity of chasing death through an anonymous chain of contacts to source the magic pills that can make death happen.

She has all the blinds pulled to block out the late evening sun. This is the dark cool world she lives in now. She hobbles to the kitchen and fills a glass with water. She has the pills. She knows what they will do. And that is why she must act now. If she waits she will be in the hands of others and it will be too late. Pull the trigger, so to speak, while you are still capable of pulling the trigger.

She sets the pills and the water on the kitchen table and picks up the phone.

She owes it to Fitch to call. She has no recollection of the deranged woman that called him earlier in the day. The woman holding the phone now is surprisingly aware of things. It is the most aware she has been in months. In the kitchen, away from her airconditioned bedroom, she can feel the warmth of the outside. She has the radio on and hears about the fires, the cricket score, and some crazy terrorist on the loose in Sydney; the soundtrack of her life and death. She dials Fitch’s number and his mobile rings, and rings. She keeps the phone pressed to her ear until it rings out.

*Well. She thinks. Death waits for no man—or woman.*

She sets the phone down and picks up the vial of pills.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch's mobile vibrates as he rushes into the foyer of Goldfields House. He observes his wife's number.

*Not now honey. I can't talk now.*

It is the first time Fitch has ever dismissed a call from his wife.

Fitch explains things to the man on security who turns white when Fitch shows him a photo of Mason on his phone. Security swipes Fitch and Nate into the lift.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason and Ben move freely around the office as the remaining workers are too distracted by what is happening outside. The sun is setting and the ash in the air has turned the sky bright red. The employees have their camera phones pressed to the windows capturing photos of the apocalypse.

They pass a row of empty meeting rooms and a cluster of high partitioned workspaces. Stationary room, utilities room, kitchen, first aid room. In time they approach a bank of large glass offices with views of the harbour. This is where the big brass wheel and deal. Mason stops at an office marked Craig King—CEO, outside of which a woman is preparing to leave. Mason smooths down his hair and wipes the sweat off his face.

"I have an appointment with Mr King."

The woman looks up. It is late and the sequence is wrong. All visitors for Craig are announced by downstairs security. And the visitor looks odd. He's fidgeting and his eyes won't focus. But the boy appeases her, maybe they are acquaintances that Craig forget to tell her about.

"And you are?" she asks.

"Mason Turner."

She checks her screen calendar. And while she is distracted Mason leads Ben into the office and closes and locks the sliding door.

The man inside is on the phone but he sees Mason's gun, and, like he has been expecting this moment, hangs up and sits back in his chair.

## Chapter 16

Mason assesses the large office. Mahogany desk, hip metal open shelves stacked with tombstone plaques marking transformational transactions; bank refinanced this, acquired that, sold this and restructured that. Floor to ceiling windows with a view of the harbour and interior frosted glass walls that are impossible to see in or out of. It is the kind of space that would house a team of people in the Penrith call centre and this man has it all to himself. And the man behind the desk is not what Mason expected. He barely looks a day out of school. He looks pretend. Mason expected more.

"Nice office," Mason says

"What do you want?" Craig asks, staring at the gun.

"Great view," Mason continues, "puts the Penrith carpark to shame."

Craig is shaking and struggling to order his thoughts. He recalls his Head of HR dismissing the police visit to the Penrith office. Another fine piece of information



from Craig's Ministry of Misinformation. But why is the crazy gun toting bloke in his office? And equally as weird, why is there a kid sitting on the floor scribbling in a pad.

"What do you want?"

The phone rings before Mason can reply.

"PA?" Mason asks.

Craig nods.

"Speaker phone. Tell her things are fine and she should go home."

Craig does so and his PA buys the ruse, reminding him about tomorrow's meetings before signing off.

"You know I've had a bloody rough day," Mason says, "this country has gone bad I tell you. The stuff I've seen today."

"What do you want?"

"Well," Mason says, sitting down and sliding his termination letter across the desk, "I came to see you about my job."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Job. He wants his job back. Shit, he can have it. Just get that gun out of my face.*

Craig knows the man is crazy. Has to be. He is shaking and fidgeting and slapping his face. Looks like the living dead with his bandaged hand and bruised face. Drugs? Ice? Craig learnt a lot about those things on that show *Struggle Street*. And what's with the kid? Looks like the kid in the *Sixth Sense* movie, the one who saw dead people—but no one believed him until everyone was dead. The sound of the kid scratching away in his pad makes Craig nervous.

"We can reinstate your position," Craig says.

Mason laughs and holds up his cut hand. The bandages are already soaked with blood.

"Cut meself today," he says, enjoying the young man's discomfort, "hey, it ain't that bad, saw far worse in the field. You know I went to a medical centre but the Doctor didn't know the first thing about fixing it. Bloke makes a million dollars a year sellin' Botox and fillers and silicon injections but didn't have the faintest idea about basic first aid. I stitched meself up, like I was taught in the army."

"About your role sir," Craig tries to ground the conversation.

Mason ignores him and gestures toward Ben.

"This is my son. Ben meet Mr King, the boss of my former company."

Ben regards Craig coldly and Craig returns the favour. It's hard to be civil when you've got a gun in your face. Ben resumes his drawing.

"Don't worry," Mason whispers conspiratorially to Craig, "it's not you. Kid hasn't said a word for five years. He ain't stupid though. Sharp with his maths."

Mason glances out the window. It is dark (*when did that happen* he thinks) and the lights of the surrounding office buildings float like fireflies. But Mason perceives a threat. The police, once they cotton on to things, will likely set up snipers in the neighbouring buildings.

"Ben please move to the corner beside the cabinet."

Ben moves away from the window and squats behind the metal shelving. Mason then waves his gun at Craig.

"Mr Craig, please lower the blinds."

Craig does as he is told. The office seems a lot smaller with the blinds down.

“Now where were we?” Mason continues, “oh yeah the shit I’ve seen. You reckon we live in a civilised society?”

Craig stares at him.

“Well?” Mason urges.

Craig doesn’t know what to say.

“It ain’t a trick question. Yes or no?”

Craig nods.

“Well shit so did I but it’s rubbish. People are out there doing the most damndest things to each other.”

Craig doesn’t care about society; he’s focused on the here and now.

“Are you going to shoot me?”

Mason glances at the gun like he forgot he was holding it.

“I’m sorry about your job,” Craig says, “you can have it back.”

Mason laughs. He had started today’s journey intending to confront this man about his redundancy. But he has realised that losing his job is just symbolic of a deeper injustice.

“This is not about getting me job back. It is about why you took it from me in the first place.”

## Chapter 17

Time. What is it? Where does it come from? And more importantly, where does it go? Because time, for Fitch Turner, is running out.

Fitch is standing outside the stationary room with a clear line of sight of the CEO’s office. The frosted glass makes it impossible to see what is going on inside. The PA, who was on her way out when Fitch and Nate arrived, has told Fitch everything she can about the strange man and boy, and that Mr King, the Company’s CEO, was alone before they locked him inside his office.

“If I’d known I’d have...”

*You would have what?* Fitch thinks. *Risked your life for your boss? Conducted a citizen’s arrest? Please.* Fitch tunes out from the upset woman’s narrative.

“We going in chief?”

Nate wants a piece of the action. But the kid has no idea what is awaiting for him inside.

Fitch shakes his head. He needs to think. He has heard the media and police reports. Light on facts they have assembled a convincing profile of Mason Turner the terrorist, complete with Islamic radicalisation back story. Time in Afghanistan keeping the peace saw Mason bring the war and terror home with him. They’re calling him a radicalised sleeper.

Fitch knows the police will put two and two together and come up with this building in the city. They will converge on the place en mass. Counter terrorism and hostage extraction teams. Full riot gear, stun and flash grenades, and glass breaking equipment. Snipers in the surrounding buildings. No bullshit negotiators

on the phones. Mason will not stand a chance. Fitch knows he must act before the real police arrive.

The remaining office workers are hovering around with their camera phones intrigued by what a pair of police officers are doing outside the CEO's office on a Friday night. Has Craig lost the plot totally this time and they're here to arrest him? Or even better, is this something to do with that terrorist on the loose in the city? Fitch sets Nate the task of clearing the floor and mobilising building security.

Eager to be involved, Nate starts ordering the people back, and Fitch turns to Craig's PA.

"You have a second key to the office don't you?"

A little white in the face but otherwise holding up, she nods.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Why me?*

Craig knows that is what the lunatic is really asking. And it is a dangerous question. How does Craig answer a question like that? Does he tell this maniac what he wants to hear, or does he tell him what he needs to here? Truth or dare anyone?

Thankfully Mason distracts Craig.

"Did you know houses are burning in the mountains right now? Just going *pop, pop, pop*, like little *Paddle Pop* stick houses," Mason says.

Craig nods. *Is that what this is about? This bloke has lost his house in the fires. Shit, we'll buy him another home.*

"Tell me about yourself," Mason says.

"Huh?"

"Tell me about you," Mason clarifies.

"I—I don't understand," Craig says.

It is a simple question, but in Craig's defence, how do you start a D&M with a gun toting lunatic.

"Brothers? Sisters?"

"Only child," Craig mutters.

"Mum and Dad? Alive? Dead?"

"Both alive," Craig says, "separated."

Craig wonders if Craig Senior and his mother are aware of what is happening to him right now. Unlikely. Craig Senior has deals to do and Mum has parties to organise.

"Girlfriend?"

"Yes."

Mason raises his eyebrows, willing Craig to continue.

"Elaborate. What's she like?"

"Blonde. Tall. Likes the attention of my mates. She's with me for my money."

"Doesn't sound like a keeper."

Now that is almost as insightful as his Head of Marketing's departing words. *Not a keeper*, so why does Craig keep her?

But Craig sees past the distracting Q&A and gets to what really matters.

"Are you going to kill me?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason considers the question. Why would someone think that of him? He is not a violent individual. But before Mason can answer, the phone rings again. Mason raises his eyebrows; PA? Police?

“Girlfriend,” Craig says.

Mason grins, the woman’s ears must have been burning.

“Put her on speaker phone but let it ring through to voicemail.”

Craig does and the love of his life Mia leaves a flustered message.

“Oh Craig dear. I’ve heard about things on the news. Some madman on the loose near your offices. They say he’s one of those Middle Eastern people and he’s got a gun and bombs. Are you alright? Please call. And oh,” she adds seemingly as an after thought but Craig knows it was the real reason for her call, “should I defer tonight’s dinner reservation by an hour or two? Such a shame.”

She signs off with a lip smacking kiss.

“Cute,” Mason says, wondering how he became a Middle Eastern terrorist, “but I repeat—not a keeper.”

Craig doesn’t argue. He is relieved to know that the authorities know.

\* \* \* \* \*

The media cop a lot of flak but they are a resourceful bunch; who else can turn a decorated terror fighter into a terrorist in less than three hours? And right now they’re listening into the secure police channel and learning about an incident at Goldfields Tower, the head office of Southern Cross Building Materials. Reports of an armed male with hostages on the upper floors. All available units ordered to respond.

*That’s our man.*

The news spreads faster than the fires in the mountains. Police and media swarm on the locale like locusts.

## Chapter 18

Mason sits in the chair opposite Craig. He has a captive audience, so to speak, and he has some things to get off his chest.

“I spent a decade of my life fighting for this country. Ten years, risking my life for you and twenty-three million other sponges just like you. I dodged the bullets in Afghanistan so you lot can binge on reality TV and complain about the quality of your coffee and the speed of your Internet connection. You want to see reality? Get over to the Stan some time. They’ve got it all over there. Entire villages being razed. Innocent women being raped and killed. Children orphaned. And those same orphaned children recruited as suicide bombers. Taliban, ISIS, Al Qaeda, Haqqani Network. You name ‘em, they’ve got ‘em. And the one thing those bastards hate more than their ethnic minorities, is the invading infidels. They try and kill you in ambushes and with roadside bombs. And—”

Mason hears something outside and sees a shadow moving behind the frosted glass. He drops into a crouch, gun raised. He stares, waiting. All is still. Silent. He sits back in the chair and continues.

“You know I shot a lot of people in my time. *Pow—pow—pow.*”

Mason makes a mock shooting motion with the gun and Craig flinches back in his chair.

“Just shootin’ up everything I saw in that dirty desert. And I got shot at plenty of times. Pure luck the bullets missed me. But I saw me mates killed by snipers and hidden bombs. When’s the last time you saw a person with third degree burns, skin just peeling off them, missing an arm, missing a leg?”

Craig nods, because he thinks that is the response the man wants.

“And then you come home, which should be cause for celebration, the homecoming of a hero soldier, but it is the ultimate insult. This country doesn’t even remember the war you’ve been fighting. *Afghanistan—where’s that? We pulled out of the Middle East years ago didn’t we?* The very society you risked your life to defend doesn’t want to know you. You struggle to get a job. People look at you weird. You get kicked around in the street. You watch your mates committing suicide. You lose your friends and your family. And the Government’s response?”

Mason pauses and gestures for Craig to fill in the gap. But Craig is too afraid to speak. And even if he could he isn’t sure what to say.

“Well the Government puts you on medication. They turn you into a doped up zombie and cut you loose. Thanks soldier for your service, good luck now.”

Now that Mason has started he cannot stop. And Craig sits and listens and thinks this cannot be real. It is like the backstory for some movie character. The gross mistreatment from the ruling hierarchy that sets the former good guy on a path to destruction. Craig can’t help but compare his trivial concerns to the life of this man.

“I’m sorry,” Craig says.

“What for?”

The question stumps Craig. He is sorry. He knows he is. He feels sorry for this man. Doesn’t he? Or does he feel sorry for his current situation and will say anything to save himself.

“For everything,” Craig says.

Mason laughs. He is pacing now. Walking the length of the office, keeping away from the external windows. The phone rings.

*Bloody call centre this place.*

“The non keeper? PA?” he asks.

Craig shakes his head.

“Answer it on speaker phone,” Mason snaps.

Craig does.

“Hello Mr King are you alright?”

Mason recognises the voice. It is his brother; police officer Fitch Turner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason starts pacing again. He gestures for Craig to respond to the call.

“Yes. I am unharmed.”

“Mason can you hear me?”

Mason stares at the phone. He smells a rat.

“How many police have you got with you Fitch?”

“Just me.”

“I don’t believe you Fitch.”

Mason strains to see through the frosted glass. All is still out on the floor. But he knows they are out there.

“Put the gun down Mason and come out. I promise I will protect you.”

“Not going to happen Fitch.”

“At least let Ben out.”

Mason does not want to let Ben out. There is still more for his son to learn about this country’s injustices. About why his father is the way he is. And why all of this is not his father’s fault.

“Not going to happen Fitch. So you best tottle home for dinner now.”

“If you do not let Ben and Mr King out Mason I cannot control what happens to you.”

“Good bye Fitch.”

Mason ends the call and stands rocking on the spot. Fitch being out there has rattled him. Why can’t people just let him be? He slaps his face and clenches and unclenches his fists. He peeks out beyond the window blinds looking for movement atop the surrounding buildings or in the office windows. He can hear police sirens echoing through the city streets. They’re coming. Or more likely Fitch was lying and the police are already outside.

“They think I’m mad,” Mason says, levelling the gun at Craig, “why is that?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch can only see shadows through the frosted glass but it is enough. One sitting at a desk, he presumes CEO Craig King, and another, he presumes Mason, pacing the office. But concerningly he cannot see Ben. He can hear Mason’s raised voice. He can also hear the police sirens converging on the area. Time is running out.

The police approach to resolving terrorist standoffs has evolved. The Lindt Café siege taught the AFP a thing or two about dissolving hostage situations. The approach has become a touch more French and a little more United States. A bit more, shoot first and ask questions later. You are a terrorist and that gives you zero rights, so we’ll blow you away before you can do the same to anyone else.

Fitch knows he must act. The incessant ticking of the clock on the wall reminds him of every second that passes. He has a flash back to a suburban supermarket and a crazy man with a shotgun. His annual birthday trip through purgatory is playing out in reality, but with a twist. It is his brother in there with the gun. But this is what Fitch wanted all along isn’t it? A shot at redemption. To banish the demons of the past.

Nate will be back soon and that will complicate things. Fitch wants to keep the kid close enough to be useful but out of the line of fire.

Fitch readies the spare key the receptionist provided him and creeps hunched over to the door. He pulls his gun but then decides to return it to his holster. He breathes hard. He knows what is inside; the beginning of the beginning or the beginning of the end.

But what else is there to do?

He turns the key in the lock, pulls the door open, and passes the point of no return.

## Chapter 19

An enemy breach.

For Mason it is all instinct and muscle memory of the things that kept him alive in the Stan. He dives across the desk and drops behind his former CEO, gun trained on the Taliban suicide bomber entering the office. Mason's a feather width away from shooting before he realises the invading Taliban is unarmed. A police officer patting the air.

"Easy. Easy. I'm unarmed. Easy."

The familiar voice brings Mason back. He blinks and steadies his gun hand.

"I told you to go home."

"Put the gun down Mason."

Fitch's tone is even and he stands still. Mason is fighting to regain control. The drug withdrawals have intensified his anxiety. Fitch knows even slight jerky movements might be misinterpreted.

"Lock the door, gun across here, and sit down," Mason orders.

Fitch slides his gun, nice and slow, across the floor and sits with his back against the frosted glass wall. Welcome to the Turner family reunion.

"Now Fitch," Mason says picking up the gun and slipping it into the rear waist of his pants, "why'd you have to go and ruin everything?"

Fitch takes in the office. He sees Ben crouched in the corner watching him. At least Mason has had the sense to put his son somewhere half safe. Mr King, who seems too young to be CEO, is sitting at his desk, staring sideways at the gun Mason rests against his head.

"Put the gun down Mason," Fitch instructs, "it is over."

Mason laughs. "Over. What's over?"

"Let Ben out."

Mason glances at his son.

"He's fine. He's learning some life skills."

Craig shifts and Mason jabs the gun against his temple. Craig's hands spring back on to the table.

"How many are out there?" Mason asks.

"None—yet," Fitch says.

"Bullshit."

"Truth. But they are coming. An army of them."

"An army of them," Mason muses, "what do they think I am?"

"They're confused. They have gathered the pieces Mason and put them together the wrong way. They think you are a terrorist."

Mason laughs. He spent ten years of his life fighting terrorists only to become one?

"You've done some bad stuff today Mason," Fitch speaks like he is addressing a child, "you shot up a bunch of kids. The police believe you have hostages and are planning a larger attack. When they arrive they will take you down."

Mason keeps laughing.

"I shot up a bunch of terrorists Fitch because the little bastards were going to behead me for their Internet show. I took down the terrorists but now I'm the terrorist? I didn't ask for any of it Fitch. But people just keep pushing me."

"Let Ben out."

Fitch is thinking hard about a way to bring his brother down. But he knows from experience that talking to Mason when he is in this state is futile. Pressured, he plays his trump card.

"I brought you something," Fitch says, reaching inside his pocket.

"No!" Mason trains the gun on Fitch.

Fitch pats the air.

"Easy Mason. It is not a weapon."

Fitch works his right hand slowly inside his pocket. Mason cranes his neck like a turtle to see. Fitch's hand emerges holding a vial of pills he took from Mason's former workplace.

"I brought these for you Mason."

Fitch crawls forward and places the vial on the desk.

"Take them Mason. They will help you think straight."

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch knows the pills are the best thing to bring Mason down; can't talk him down, so he will try and medicate him down.

But Mason is not playing.

The pills are tempting. The softer side of his brain, the side that has been conditioned by the pills is screaming out for them. But the stubborn side knows that if he takes the pills now then today will all be a waste.

"No Fitch. The pills make me a doped up vegetable."

"Take the pills Mason and we just walk out of here," Fitch counters.

Mason ignores the pills.

"Why are you here Fitch?"

Good question that. Fitch recalls his unfinished Q&A on the drive into town.

"I don't know."

It is a lie. He's considered things further and realised it is all quite simple. Sergeant Fitch has a conscience to clear. He needs to right the wrongs of his birthday twenty years ago. It is all quite selfish.

"Let Ben go and this gets instantly better Mason."

"He's fine," Mason snaps, "just keep your head down there Ben."

"What is it you want Mason?" Fitch asks.

Mason raises his chin. He has condensed his numerous grievances into a single symbolic request.

"I want an apology," Mason says, "on the phone from the Prime Minister."

"That is not going to happen," Fitch counters, "the government does not get involved in hostage situations."

Mason laughs.

"Really Fitch? Let me tell you a bit about this government not getting involved. They send a load of citizens off to war and then abandon them on their return. Won't even look those soldiers in the eye. And those men are dying, not only in the



Middle East but right here at home, surrounded by the very society they fought to protect. And what do their families get? A cookie cutter condolence letter, some petty cash to see them through, and their man's name on some bullshit honour role that never sees the light of day. It is criminal Fitch. Those men fought the wars the Government declared and were too afraid to fight for themselves."

"There are other ways to get your message across Mason," Fitch counters.

Mason laughs.

"No one listens. I'm nothing. I'm less than nothing. This bloke here," Mason nudges Craig with his gun, "proved it this morning when he sacked me."

Fitch's mobile interrupts things.

"Can I get that?" Fitch asks, "it could be important."

Mason is wary but nods. Fitch pulls his mobile out and glances at the screen.

"Someone wants to talk to you Mason."

Fitch puts it on speaker phone.

"Fitch! Fitch! Where are you?"

"I'm with Mason."

"Is Ben there?" Linda is frantic.

"Yes. He is unhurt."

"Thank God. Thank God. I'm hearing stories on the news. The police know about Mason and you. I told them things Fitch. I had to."

"It is alright Linda. Speak to Mason."

There is a long pause. Mason stares blankly at the mobile. He's sweating profusely. His gun hand is shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"Mason. What are you doing? They're saying you've got a gun. That you've done some bad things."

Her tone is soothing, like she is coercing a child.

"I'm not the only one," Mason counters.

"Why have you got Ben?"

"Because I wanted to spend some time with him. Because I'm his father. Why did you remove me as a parent at the school?"

"Have you taken your pills Mason?"

"Never mind the pills Linda. Why'd you do that at the school? Why can't I see my own son?"

"I was scared Mason. Now let Ben go and we can discuss things."

Fitch is impressed by Linda holding it together. She is subtly exerting leverage; give me something and then you get something. But Mason is not playing.

"Ben wants to stay."

"What are you doing Mason? What do you want?"

"Respect," Mason says. That single word sums up his grievances, "I want an apology from the Prime Minister. For what this Government has done. For what they did to me. For what they did to us."

"I don't care about the Government, Mason. Please, let Ben go."

"I don't want to Linda."

It is then the dam wall breaks and two decades of frustrations spill over.

"You are a coward Mason. That's what you are. You drink too much. You beat us. You scare us. You think that is the man we want? We waited for you to come home from the war Mason. Living every day expecting to turn on the news and find

out you were dead. We stuck with you and this is how you treat us? And you have ruined Ben.”

“Did you know he responded today?” Mason interrupts.

“Well give yourself a great big pat on the back Mason. Remember it was you who stole his voice in the first place.”

Mason does not like the conversation.

“I’m going now.”

Linda feels her chance slipping away and she goes all out.

“You son of a bitch Mason. You let my boy go. You hurt my boy and I will kill you. I will never forgive you. You are nothing. The world would be better without you. I will...”

Fitch graciously hangs up. The room is eerily silent. Mason sways on the spot as if Linda’s words are still biting at him. The police sirens from outside the building swirl around him like whining mosquitos. He pulls himself together. He whispers conspiratorily in Craig’s ear.

“Not a keeper hey boss?”

Fitch tries again.

“Just put the gun down Mason and we can all walk out of here”

“For what?” Mason challenges, “I ain’t got nothing left. Phone call just proved it. I gave everything to this country. Put my bloody life on the line. Did the killing and dirty work so that the masses could keep their hands and their consciences clean.”

“We can’t change the past,” Fitch says, “but there’s the future.”

“The future? What is a future when you’re gonna be doped up on drugs, begging for a job? Getting kicked around. That ain’t a future is it?”

“There’s Ben,” Fitch counters, “he deserves a father.”

Mason glances at his son and is silent for a long time.

“Not a deranged one like me. Kid deserves better.”

“Every kid needs a father Mason.”

At that moment they are disturbed by sounds outside the office. Footsteps and furniture being moved. Mason ducks instinctively behind his hostage. He sees the shadows shifting outside the office. He hears muffled voices. He knows the police have arrived. Fitch knows it too and it strengthens his resolve to protect his brother.

“We can get you right Mason.”

“We tried that already Fitch. Didn’t work. Just made things worse. Get me a line to the Prime Minister, and then we can talk Fitch.”

“Won’t happen Mason.”

## Chapter 20

They come in fast and in great numbers. The cavalry has arrived. A big old Terrorist Response posse, complete with big ol’ assault weapons, big ol’ black kevlar bullet proof body armour and shields, and a mighty glass busting pylon.

And the fat bearded senior in charge of this unit; Robocop reincarnated—Robocop on steroids—establishes a perimeter exclusion zone around the office and sets about grilling Craig's P.A. for information.

How many are in there?

*Four. One crazy man with a kid, Police Officer, and my boss.*

The crazy one, how did he look?

*Crazy.*

Was the kid hurt?

*No.*

How's the office laid out?

*Desk. Table. Shelves.*

More information.

*Don't know, it's an office.*

The table and shelves—metal or wood?

*Metal shelves, wood table.*

Does the phone work?

*Yes.*

Is your boss healthy?

*Yes.*

Has there been any gunfire?

*No. And oh dear I think I'm going to be sick.*

It is a rapid fire Q&A to complete the picture in the commander's mind's eye of just who and what he is dealing with. Because the fragmented picture the behind the scenes intelligence team has assembled is very hard to believe. Here are the facts as they have them.

Mason Turner, the Target, is ex-military. Three years in Afghanistan. Started as a foot soldier but ended on the fringe of Special Operations. The military angle could be good news or bad news. Good, as the bloke will likely understand the hostage negotiation process and might just get with it. Bad, because the Target isn't some fly-by-nighter that's picked up a gun for the first time. But did he work with explosives in the military? Stupid question, you fight in Afghanistan your working with explosives. Better question: did he work directly with explosives, either assembling or disassembling? No. Well thank Lordy for that.

But there's more.

The Target has suffered from mental illness since returning from the field. Inability to adjust to society. Apparent dissatisfaction with the ruling Government (don't we all), but the Target's gripes go beyond the backyard BBQ rant, extending to threatening Government officials and verbal threats against the country. Interest in Islamic doctrine with more than accidental visits to known extremist websites. And the combination of CCTV train station footage, witness sightings, and Internet vigilante cameos, point to a desperate and dangerous man with an agenda. Losing his job was the trigger. Western Sydney was his canvas. The Government is his target. He is a terrorist.

A radicalised Islamic terrorist.

The exact point of Mason's radicalisation is impossible to pinpoint and it does not really matter. Because when the lion's in the front garden it doesn't matter

how it got there, it is there, and you got to deal with. Seeds were probably sown in Afghanistan. Started off fighting terrorism and ended up embracing it.

And that is the issue with exposing our good men to the war in the Middle East, the Commander thinks, they bring the war and all its evil home. Might not surface straight away but surfaces years later.

The Commander has been briefed on all of this and knows he has a major incident on his hands. The entire nation will be watching. And as if on cue a young reporter holding a handcam appears on the floor. He is breathless from climbing the fire stairs from the basement to get past the police lines in the foyer.

“Who let Peter Parker in?” the Commander growls, “get him out of here.”

“Terrorism or activism?” the reporter asks as he is manhandled out of the room.

What’s the difference, the Commander thinks. Both are fighting to get their message across; one uses a sword while the other uses spray paint.

“Hero or villain?”

“Neither,” the Commander snaps, “he’s a criminal.”

“Is this another Lindt Café?” the reporter calls as he is dragged out of sight.

*Not if I can help it,* the Commander thinks.

The Commander walks carefully to the edge of the exclusion zone and studies the office. Six Robocop clones are kneeling like black lions behind a desk with their too big guns trained on the office, and two others kneel behind them with shields and the glass busting battering ram. It is reminiscent of a medieval siege.

“Any movement?” the Commander asks.

“Difficult to see, appears passive.”

The men are deciphering shadows, because that is all they can see through the frosted glass.

“Son of a bitch,” the commander growls, and unhooks his hand held radio and talks to his snipers laid out in the surrounding buildings.

“What do you see?”

The truth—

*Not much.*

Dressed in black they look like panthers in the dark jungle of office towers, lying in wait behind their rifles. The ash in the air is playing havoc with their telescopic sights. But these men have x-ray vision, or the closest thing to it, heat sensor technology. More *Predator* than *Superman*. Despite the drawn blinds they track the activity in the office via infrared heat images. One heavy red and green shape sitting and not moving, two standing, one pacing the other still, and one other, partially visible, must be located behind a metal cabinet or something, on the floor.

“The Target seems agitated. Moving constantly.”

“If he engages a hostage, you take him out.”

The commander is on edge. The situation is high profile. His superiors and the media have only one thing on their mind, the Lindt Café.

And as for that other officer, thinking he’s *Dirty Harry*, marching into the lion’s den. He’ll be singing for his supper if he gets out of this unscathed.

“Get the negotiator up here,” The Commander orders, “I want to know what that bastard inside wants.”

## Chapter 21

“Take the pills Mason.”

Fitch watches Mason pace the narrow space behind the CEO’s desk. The airconditioning has cut out (likely the work of the Special Ops unit outside) and the office is like a sauna. Sweat leaches out of Fitch dripping down his arms and face. He senses the patience of the officer’s outside wearing thin.

“I want to talk to the Prime Minister, Fitch.”

“That will not happen Mason. The government does not negotiate with criminals.”

Mason looks confused.

“Criminal? I am the bad guy? How did that happen?”

“Just put down the gun Mason and I will get us out of here.”

But Mason is still trying to rationalise things.

“I get cut up by a bunch of kids on the train. I see a pimp beating up his underage people smuggled worker. Then I just about get me head lopped off by some would-be teenage jihadists. All of this in a country I risked my life for. But I am the bad guy? Explain that to me Fitch.”

Fitch could not explain it even if he tried. The world and life are not fair. Fairness is determined by wealth and power and which side of Sydney you live on.

“It does not matter Mason, all the police see right now is a lunatic with a gun and three hostages. Let them go Mason and I will stay with you.”

“No. No, Fitch,” Mason says, “I never did nothing. People did stuff to me but I never did anything to anyone. These people don’t respect what I did. I had a mate Fitch. We fought together in that piss ant desert. We dodged the bullets together and made it home together. But he’s dead Fitch. Took himself out. The demons killed him. The government killed him. The government that sent him to that desert and the government that abandoned him when he returned. You know what his family got? Fifteen thousand dollars, Fitch. Tell me, Fitch, what’s a life worth?”

Fitch can’t answer that. But he knows, like it or not, some lives are worth more than others. Fitch is struggling to think. The office feels as if it is burning up. He needs to sit down. But he forces himself to stand. He needs to be ready to respond. The men outside are coming in; it is only a matter of time. Fitch sees that Mason is too close to the office windows.

“Move away from the windows Mason.”

The instruction focuses Mason. He knows, like Fitch, that there are snipers out there. Mason wheels Craig sideways in his chair and crouches behind his former boss.

It is then that the desk phone rings. Mason rolls his eyes. *Who now?* He nods and Craig places it on speaker phone.

“Who am I speaking to?”

The voice is firm, professional and precise. The police negotiator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch knew the call was coming. The men outside have to try at least, to talk Mason down. Fitch wants to take control of the conversation but Mason has it in hand.

“Who are you?” Mason snaps.

“My name is Henry (a nice neutral and passive sounding name). Who am I talking to? Is this Mason?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Mason. Who have you got there with you?”

Mason stares at the phone. He can sense a rat.

“Three others.”

“Are they injured in any way?”

“They’re fine. And yes I do have a gun. And I will use it. Now let’s just cut the bullshit. I want the Prime Minister on the line. He’s gonna apologise for a few things.”

There is a moment of silence. Fitch knows the negotiator is relaying the information. The line is also likely tapped, with at least five others eavesdropping. All of them listening out for clues; random sounds that might give a hint as to what is going on inside the office. And the negotiator has been told to stall and pacify, while they work out a way to end this situation.

“Now Mason, that’s a difficult request. The Prime Minister is a busy man. He’s...”

“The next time this phone rings the PM better be on the other end.”

Mason hangs up.

The office is silent as Mason paces the small corner behind Craig. He mashes his gun hand into his forehead. He knows they are trying to trick him outside and he is struggling to think straight. He is getting tired. It has been a long day. But he has to stay alert.

“What about Ben?” Fitch asks.

Mason stops pacing and glances at his son. Ben appears afraid. Mason winks at him. Ben smiles reluctantly.

“What about him Fitch?”

“He should not be here.”

“It is too late Fitch. I’ve already messed the kid up. I’m the reason he doesn’t speak.. I abandoned him for half a decade and when I got home I turned on him. I roughed him up so much he lost his voice. What kind of father would do that?”

There are tears in Mason’s eyes. The phone is ringing again but Mason knows it is just going to be more lies from the men outside. They couldn’t have got the PM that quick.

“I hurt my boy Fitch. Scared him so bad he doesn’t talk no more. I wanted him with me today Fitch to try and make things better. And you know what Fitch, we had some fun. Had a great old time running around town.”

“It is not too late Mason,” Fitch interrupts, “you can make amends. Kids don’t bare grudges. Craig here is going to give you your job back. And once we’re out of here we can talk to Linda. Arrange for you to spend some time with Ben. Maybe spend some time with Linda.”

For a moment Mason is taken by the notion. But suspicion takes over. It is all just another neatly dressed up lie. He levels the gun at Fitch.

“That is bullshit Fitch.”

Fitch pats the air. He knows how Mason’s actions will be interpreted from outside.

“You got to put the gun down Mason.”

Mason shakes his head, prodding the air with the gun.

“No Fitch. You’re no different to the rest of them. You’re full of lies.”

Mason’s brain is overwhelmed by anger and despair. And with it comes the flashbacks of Afghanistan. The heat and dust, ghostly faces of the dead and dying.

“The gun Mason. Put it on the table.”

Mason keeps the gun raised and slaps his head with his free hand trying to rid his brain of the images. He keeps Craig close.

And Craig is starting to lose it. He wonders why the police don’t just raid the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Commander has a sixth sense for these things and he has a very good idea of where this situation is heading. There is zero chance of the PM getting involved. They’ll alert the PM to the request, of course, but it will be quickly filed away in the not going to happen folder. And once the Target realises they’re not going to play ball things will get ugly.

The Commander instructs the negotiator to keep calling the office. If anything, the incessant ringing will distract the Target and wear him down much like disengaging the airconditioning. But those are just subtle tricks. They’ll weaken the Target but they won’t get him out of the office. The Commander checks in with his eyes in the sky and the snipers report an escalation of tensions inside the office.

The Commander considers the information but is interrupted.

“Chief,” one of his men mutters, “who is that?”

The Commander looks across the room and sees a young officer, crouched behind a desk near the office, looking at them.

“Where did he come from and what is he doing there?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Nate, the loyal Labrador, waiting at the door for his master.

Returning from clearing the floor, Nate realised Fitch had gone into the office without him. Nate had considered going in after him but the Special Ops team had arrived too soon and he had instead taken cover behind Craig’s PA’s desk. Fitch was always saying to keep your options open. With options you are always in the game. So Nate had taken up a position close enough to respond if Fitch needed him but had kept his presence a secret from the Special Ops team, who he does not trust. Until now.

The Commander motions for him to stay put. Nate does, but he is his own man. He has been listening to the Commander issuing instructions and he does not trust the tough guys in black. Nate’s allegiance rests with Fitch. And Fitch said the man inside, his brother, was not dangerous, just misunderstood. And Fitch said he could talk his brother down and Nate believes him.

But the Special Ops team are preparing to enter the office. And once they do, things will get very ugly.

Nate hears the Commander talking now, receiving information from his snipers in the nearby buildings. The target is getting agitated. He won't answer the phone anymore. Nate can hear raised voices inside the office. Nate senses Fitch's time is running out. And there is a kid in there too. This is Nate's chance to make a difference. Nate owes it to Fitch. Fitch would come in for him.

Nate eyes the key that Fitch left in the office door. He readies his gun.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What is that kid doing? Who was in charge of searching and clearing the floor?*

The Commander is stunned to see the young officer but it is too dangerous to get him out now. And it will all be over soon anyway. The Commander connects to his hidden big cats in the sky.

"What do you see?"

The snipers' response: "Target becoming increasingly agitated. Weapon raised. Hostile movements. Maintaining close proximity to hostage. Officer on his feet, calm, unmoving. Fourth, likely child, crouched in South East corner."

The Commander assesses things. His negotiators continue to call the office but the Target won't answer the phone. They've also been trying Police Officer (soon to be *no officer* after this) Fitch Turner's mobile, but it has been ringing out.

The Commander has a clear conscience, he has played things entirely by the book, contain and negotiate first. He has cut the aircon and kept the phones ringing. He has done all he can and he feels the situation getting away from him and he'll be stuffed if he'll be fronting a *Lindt Café* style inquest into what went wrong. *Now tell me Commander, what made you pause? Stage fright, fear, or did you just not know what to do?* No way, not on his watch, he knows precisely what he must do.

"Sir," one of his men mutters nodding toward the office.

The Commander sees the shadows moving inside. He hears raised voices. Movements that look like a struggle. The Commander raises his radio and mutters the words that seal Mason's fate.

"Situation is red. Prepare for takedown."

Then to the Robocops poised in front of him.

"Prepare for assault."

The black clad machines rise and ready themselves.

## Chapter 22

"The gun Mason. Put it down."

But the dam wall, the mental barrier that has held Mason back for most of the day, has broken. Mason thrusts the gun at Fitch.

"No Fitch. You're just like the rest of them. Never gave two shits about me. Just come down here because Linda wanted you to. And now she don't give two shits about me neither."



Fitch is desperate. He knows how the men outside will interpret things. The desk phone is ringing. Fitch's mobile is ringing. Noise, movement, heat; the office seems to be spinning around him. He knows the men gathered outside are coming in.

He approaches Mason but Mason jabs the gun at him.

"Stay where you are Fitch. Don't come any closer."

Fitch stops and keeps his hands raised.

"I never wanted any of this Fitch. People just kept pushing. I ain't never done anything to anyone."

Mason is cracking.

"Just wanted me family back. Wanted me life back Fitch. I wanted to spend some time with my son."

"The gun Mason. Put it on the table."

Mason shakes his head but his gun arm is wavering. The resolve which Mason set out with this morning is fading. He wonders how he got into this office with the gun. He feels deeply fatigued. Like he could just sleep for days. He still wants the apology from the Prime Minister but that can come another time. He looks at his son crouched in the corner staring fearfully at him. He does not want to frighten his son anymore.

Mason lowers his gun arm. The butt of the gun touches the table. He is laying down arms. But the phone's incessant ringing is suddenly too much for him. He picks up the phone and hurls it into the glass wall. It shatters with a sound like—

A heavy projectile.

A sound like—

Maybe one of the hostages getting assaulted.

A sound like—

Maybe...

\* \* \* \* \*

...an explosive being thrown.

It snaps the Commander into action; there will be no dead civilians on his conscience.

To the snipers: "Take the shot!"

To the Robocops in front of him: "Breach! Breach! Breach!"

Closely followed by a bemused, "what the fuck?" as the Commander sees the young officer who has been camped out in the exclusion zone rise from behind the desk and rush toward the office.

It is too late for the Commander to rescind his earlier order, the machine, as they say, has been set in motion. The armoured police rush forward with the medieval battering ram as their stun grenades make a flash brighter than any lightning and a crack louder than any thunder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason and Fitch see it all in slow motion, like watching a movie car crash from different camera angles.

Mason has surrendered, in spirit at least, and is laying down his gun when the sliding door flies open. Mason sees a man, no a boy, seemingly not much older

than his own son but dressed in a police uniform. The wide eyed officer barges in with his gun raised.

*Incoming. Taliban suicide bomber breaching perimeter.*

Mason responds precisely how the military big brass trained him to respond. The blood, you might say, is on their hands. Mason swings his gun around. And in the instant before the shooting starts Mason hears the most prophetic words of the entire afternoon.

Ben the mute that was—or wasn't, suddenly finds his voice.

"Dad. Nooooo!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Fitch, who has lived twenty years with the penance of an ill-used split second, suddenly realises what today has all been about.

He sees Nate rush in with all his good intentions but knows the kid is about to exit with none. Guided by a conscience on autopilot Fitch snaps into action.

"Ben, lie down. Cover your head!"

Then, as Mason levels his gun, Fitch dives sideways in front of the young officer. It is the kind of dive that any decent action movie would present in over the top slow motion. Not bad movement, as they say, for a big man. Fitch flies through the air, as the world around him explodes with gunfire and shattering glass. Black shadows pour into the office. People screaming. Wood and metal splintering.

As battle zone Afghanistan comes to Sydney.

## Chapter 23

It lasts all of ten seconds. And the trailing silence is all the more profound for the noise and madness that preceded it. There is just the rush of the wind through the shattered windows. The muck of the outside getting inside. And the sound of the black clad robots stepping through the debris, and Mason gurgling on the floor, choking on his own blood as he struggles to breathe.

Mason sees the world upside down, the downlights in the room swirl like stars. Frantic, faceless voices, float around him. Words about securing and sealing the room, disarming the Target, *and keep away from those windows it's a bloody long drop*. Then Mason sees his son's face, crying and afraid. He feels his son's hands under his head. Then Fitch appears, calling for a paramedic as he starts compressing his chest.

*Now why would he be doing that?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason may not know that he is dying but Fitch does. He sees the ragged hole in Mason's chest, the result of a sniper shot. Nate's shot flew high and wide. Fitch tries to plug the hole in Mason's chest with his shirt and stray paper, and starts a desperate round of CPR.

Fitch is too amped up on adrenalin to realise he has been shot also. He caught Mason's bullet in his right shoulder as he dove in front of Nate. It does not hurt now but it will later.

"Stay with us brother. Keep your eyes open."

Fitch maintains the tug of war between the claws of death and the frail fingers of the living. One of the Special Ops officers tries to pat Mason down and roll him over but Fitch pushes the black robot away.

"He's unarmed. Call an ambulance."

Fitch sees Ben kneeling next to him. He sees the kid's fear and wonders how the world can treat us like this.

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig, the most ill prepared of all of them for what happened, still sits in his seat like a department store mannequin, advertising high end business shoes and shirts. Like the sole survivor of a plane crash, he is pure white and too stunned to move. It was a Matrix-like sequence; the shrapnel, glass and wood and metal seemed to fly around him in slow motion, all of it somehow avoiding him. How does that happen? He watches the men in black kick things around in his shattered office and listens as they ask him too many questions that he is too spaced out to answer. He looks at the former employee who started all of this lying bleeding on the ground and his son kneeling over him as the officer Fitch tries to keep him alive. Strangely, Craig does not want the man, Mason, to die. He senses an injustice, that the wrong man has gone down.

And amid his random soul searching Craig wonders whether Mia is enjoying her night out at the Ivy with the Bachelor from the *The Bachelor*, and what his father might think of things—*chin up kid, rebuild and prosper, and son, never think of the people, the moment you do... they'll come barging into your office with a gun.*

But amid the confusion Craig is sure about one thing; his father can shove his job. Craig was never cut out for it anyway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nate sits wide eyed against the only remaining wall of the office. One of the Special Ops stoops, his face masked like *Darth Vader*, and hits him with some questions.

*You been hit?*

*Injured?*

*Can you move?*

*Want to stand up?*

No. Nup. Nada. No thanks, don't think I can. Nate stares at the ugly aftermath of everything. Shooting and killing and enforcing the law isn't as tidy as they make out in the manuals. It has been a stark lesson for the naïve. You barge into a tense hostage situation waving a gun around what do you expect to happen? He only shot when the Target looked like he was going to shoot. At least he survived, and as they say in sport, he will be better for the experience. He knows he got lucky. He knows his bullet intended for the Target flew high and the Target's bullet intended for him found Fitch instead.

Once he recovers enough, Nate is going to have a—how did that happen moment—closely followed by a realisation he should probably seek a new profession. He can join Craig, and the earlier lunchtime Laksa slurper, in the queue for a career change.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ben can feel his father's pulse fading. He tries to haul his father out of the dark abyss he is slipping into. He blocks out the leering faces of the black clad police who don't seem to care and just stand around watching his father die. Ben hopes that Uncle Fitch can save his father's life.

Because today Ben saw a different side of his father. He saw beneath the twisted fake that returned from Afghanistan. He saw beyond the crazy man that scared him as a child. His father was trying to make amends. And his father had to work harder at things than other men. Not because he was bad but because the world treated him badly. Ben saw through his father's twisted exterior and saw the genuine individual underneath.

Uncle Fitch's efforts are getting more desperate and Ben can feel his father slipping away. His tears fall like rain on to Mason's face.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Don't cry son. I am not worth crying over.*

Mason can see but he cannot talk. His body is shutting down. He watched this sequence play out countless times in the aftermath of Taliban ambushes. Seeing men shredded by shrapnel and burnt by flames, breathing fast, trying to stay afloat in the rough ocean between life and death.

As he fights for breath Mason recalls the single true gift of the afternoon. Two words in the instant before everything erupted.

*"Dad no!"*

It was Ben. His son's voice exorcising a decade of demons. Mason had forgotten the sound but he will carry it with him now wherever he goes from here. He might have destroyed his son's early years but the two words are symbolic, at least, of a new beginning.

Fitch compressing his chest is getting on Mason's nerves. It is blurring his vision and he wants to see everything he can in these final moments. And the last thing Mason sees is his son's face. The last thing he feels before he slips into that big black hole are his son's hands. And the last thing he hears, as if proving the earlier cry was not a fluke, is Ben's voice.

*"Dad... why?"*

And Mason wishes he had the time to answer but even if he did, he's not sure what he would say.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eventually they pull Fitch away and he falls back breathless. He looks down at his brother; Mason's features appear suddenly peaceful, like he has been asleep all this time. But Fitch knows the truth and has no idea how he is going to tell Linda. And how he will explain things to Ben. He holds the boy close and lets him cry into his chest.

Fitch sees Nate being led, unharmed from the office. Nate gives Fitch a tentative thumbs up, like *I'm alright but what the hell just happened*. And it is only when one of the paramedics asks to look at Fitch's arm, he realises he has been shot.

One of the medics takes Ben.

"Careful," Fitch says, "he is the son."

The medic nods and leads Ben out of the office, as another applies a compression bandage to Fitch's upper arm.

While he is being treated Mason finds his mobile with his free hand. He sees the earlier unanswered call from his wife. The call seems so long ago but suddenly significant. He calls home. The phone rings: once, twice, three times. Each ring tightens Fitch's insides. He feels as if the world is tipping and he is slipping off the side of it. But just as he is about to hang up and call his neighbour to go and see, she picks up.

She sounds tired as always.

"You didn't answer earlier," she says

"I couldn't. Where were you just now?"

"I was in the kitchen."

She is alive. She had been ready to do it, the pills poised at her lips. It was not fear that stopped her, she stopped being afraid years ago, rather, it was the touch of heat that crept under the kitchen door that made her pause. After feeling nothing for so long, the heat was like a shot of electricity. If she could feel the heat she was capable of feeling other things. It convinced her she was not ready to leave.

"Fitch. There has been some nasty business in the city. Are you safe?"

"I'm fine. But I'm not going to be home for dinner."

"I'll leave yours in the fridge."

Silence.

"Fitch?"

"Yeah?"

"Hurry home."

Fitch hangs up. Looking out the shattered windows he can see the lights of the surrounding buildings suffocated by smoke. And further West he can see the mountains where the bushfires rage beneath an ominous red glow.

## Epilogue

An ILD—*Improvised Leaving Device*. Mason's email detonates inside the email boxes of every employee of Southern Cross Building Materials, ten hours after his departure from the Penrith branch. Thankfully it is after office hours so the IT department can activate a high priority forced recall. But those employees that read it will spruik the legend.

It is short and sweet. The good ones always are.

*I fought to protect this country. But I cannot protect you from yourselves.*

