

The Suitcase

Hansen Series, #1

by Mike Dixon,

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Chapter 1

Sting.

18 August 1942:

Colonel James Samuelson stretched himself out on the soft quilts. He needed to unwind and this was the place to do it. A soft bed and two exquisite young ladies who were attending to his physical needs. It was his first visit to such an establishment. At home in South Carolina a foray into a world of sexual license would be unthinkable. But this was not South Carolina. This was the South Pacific and there was a war going on. Two days earlier he'd been under fire. The Japs had attacked his unit and he'd lost nine men. Now, back in Australia, he had a right to a bit of self-indulgence.

The younger of the two girls clearly appreciated his robust masculine presence. She held it lovingly and turned his head towards the window as if exhibiting a work of art. A plane flew overhead. Colonel Samuelson recognized it as a military transport but failed to notice the camera pointing at him through a chink in the curtains.

Chapter 2

Suitcase.

17 January 2002:

Twenty-year-old David Paget sat in the departure lounge of New York's JFK International Airport beside thirty-five-year-old Sue Lynne. They looked an unlikely pair: David in torn denims, Sue Lynne in a smart business suit. A casual observer might have mistaken them for a lawyer and her client, a sporting personality perhaps. The young man radiated health and vitality: tall and muscular in his tight-fitting T-shirt and tattered jeans. Girls at a neighboring table couldn't take their eyes off him.

Sue Lynne cast a disapproving eye at the young ladies and opened a plastic folder. She was a slim woman of Asian appearance with pale skin and a delicate bone structure. It wasn't difficult to imagine that she had once been very

beautiful. But her natural good looks were marred by a tenseness of expression that suggested a recent illness. She glanced nervously at her watch.

'You'll soon be called for boarding, David. We need to go over what you have to do in Hong Kong.' She ran a finger down the folder as if checking items on a list. 'First you are to book in at the Pearl River Guesthouse, then you are to go to Doris' apartment. Are you sure you know where it is?'

David took a sheet of paper from his pocket.

'It's where you've marked it on this map but it won't be easy to find because the area is being redeveloped and a lot of buildings have been demolished.'

He spoke in a crisp voice as if reciting instructions.

'How do you get there?'

'I'm to show the map to a taxi driver. It says in Chinese that Doris' place is near an ancient temple. It should still be standing.'

'Good.' Sue Lynne relaxed a little. 'When you have made contact with Doris, what are you to do?'

'I'm not to hurry anything. Just play it cool. Real cool.' David leant forward earnestly. 'Give her the money and talk about you and Charlie ... say you need the suitcase to get her back to Australia.'

'When you have the suitcase and you've taken it to the guesthouse, what do you do then?'

'I have to repack the contents into the new case. The old one may attract the attention of the Hong Kong authorities. They might think we are trying to smuggle out national treasures. We are not. Everything in it belongs to your family. It is family memorabilia ...'

He was struggling over the pronunciation of the last word when a boarding call brought them to their feet.

'Goodbye, David.' She leant forward and kissed him fully on the lips.

David returned the kiss. 'Goodbye, Sue Lynne. I'll give your regards to everyone back home.'

'No.' A look of alarm sped across her face. 'You're not to tell anyone we met.'

'But I've always done so in the past.'

'In the past, we didn't have quite the same relationship.'

'They'll never guess,' he grinned.

'I wouldn't be so sure, David.'

'Do you think my mother would believe I was getting into bed with Auntie Sue Lynne?' He squeezed her arm playfully.

'Your mother might be incapable of such a thought, David. Other members of the family are not.'

David shouldered his bag and they joined a queue of people streaming towards the departure gate. They reached the security barrier and Sue Lynne grabbed his arm.

'Take care, David.' She held onto him for a moment. 'You don't know how much this means to me. You must find Doris and get the case from her. If she doesn't want to give it up, you've got to get it somehow but don't do anything that might upset her. She's an old lady and ...' Her words were lost as David was jostled along in the crowd.

Chapter 3

Doris.

The notice on the temple gate told visitors not to give money to the beggar. David did his best to ignore the old woman thrusting a copper bowl in his face but finally tossed in a coin.

He was beginning to feel anxious. Nothing had gone to plan. The guesthouse was full and he'd wasted valuable time finding alternative accommodation. To make matters worse, he'd totally misjudged the climate. He'd expected Hong Kong to be warm and had left his jacket in a locker at the airport only to find that the weather was much the same as in New York. He was freezing. None of the cheap jackets in the shops fitted his broad shoulders and he couldn't afford anything expensive.

Nor was his hunt for Doris' flat going well. Trying to save money, he had taken a bus to the district covered by Sue Lynne's map. Just as she had said, the whole area was under the developer's hammer. Streets had been erased and construction cranes dotted the skyline. With the sun already low in the sky, he eventually found the temple.

The map was drawn to suit Chinese tastes. Looking down from the temple gate, he realized it was not to scale. And the direction marked with an arrow did not point to the north. He let out a string of expletives, which did nothing to calm his nerves. Another beggar advanced towards him.

'Piss off!

He yelled at the old crone and was about to say more when a figure arrived by his side. David had noticed him earlier, dressed in a business suit and carrying a briefcase. The man shouted something in Chinese and the beggar made off.

'I'm sorry you have been troubled.'

The man spoke flawless English with a slight Chinese accent. He was just the sort of person David was trying to avoid. The smart clothes and neatly combed hair reminded him of his own family. They were obsessed with social status. David referred to them as "suits" when talking to his diving mates.

'You appear to be lost.'

'Yes. I am rather.'

'Perhaps I can be of assistance.'

'I know roughly where the place is.' David produced the map. 'A friend of mine has marked it and written something in Chinese.'

The man turned the map on its side and looked out across the expanse of cleared ground, peering backwards and forwards amongst the few remaining buildings. A hint of a smile creased his lips.

'This person who wrote on the map is a friend of yours?'

'She's my aunt.'

'Ho! Ho!' The man suddenly sounded very Chinese. 'You have a Chinese aunt?'

'She was born here in Hong Kong but she's lived most of her life in America.'

‘Huuuh!’ The man seemed amused. ‘And who will you find when you go to this place on the map?’

‘My aunt’s friend.’

This time the man was unable to restrain a laugh. He placed a hand on David’s shoulder and pointed to a dilapidated building.

‘There is the place you are looking for, young man. You had better be quick because it won’t be standing much longer and your aunt’s friend will have to find somewhere else to live.’

It took David no more than a minute to reach the old building. There were lights in some of the upstairs windows ... the only sign of life. He glanced around and his hand slipped to his money belt, aware that it stood out as a conspicuous bulge beneath his T-shirt. Should he abort the mission?

It was difficult to imagine a friend of Sue Lynne living in such a place. The old lady must have left. The building had been taken over by squatters. A feeling of failure crept over him. He imagined telephoning Sue Lynne and telling her he had given up. The thought was unbearable.

The lights in the windows flickered. He guessed the electricity had been cut off and they were using candles. If Sue Lynne’s friend, Doris, was still there, she was living in poverty. But that was not entirely out of the question. Sue Lynne said the old lady was in distressed circumstances. It was the same term his mother used when talking about an aged cousin the family had rescued from a boarding house in Parramatta. She suffered from Alzheimer’s disease and was living in squalor although she had hundreds of thousands of dollars in the bank. David wondered if Sue Lynne was talking about something similar.

He approached a doorway and found a dirty, barefoot infant playing at the foot of a flight of stairs. The child shouted in a high-pitched voice and a taller figure appeared from the gloom: a girl of about fifteen, with rouged cheeks and a tight pink dress. She smiled at David and held out a hand. The stench of cheap scent and stale sweat brought him to a standstill.

‘Hullo, da’ling.’

Her fingernails were painted bright blue. David rejected the hand and reached in his pocket for his wallet. The sight of expensive sharkskin produced an incomprehensible babble.

He took out a visiting card, printed on high-quality paper and edged with gold. Doris’ name and address appeared on one side in English and in Chinese on the other. He held up the card with the Chinese side facing the girl who narrowed her eyes and stared in silence. David suspected she couldn’t read. Then, a long blue fingernail struck out and she squawked indignantly.

‘Yoo fuck old lady!’

David felt oddly relieved.

‘Do you know her?’

‘She up in pallor.’ The girl glared at him disdainfully and jabbed a thumb over her shoulder.

He pushed past and hurried up the stairs. The first two flights were littered with food scraps and discarded drink containers. The next weren’t quite as bad. Scraps of carpet covered the floor and the brass fittings were still in place. He reached the top and was reminded of old movies. Handsome westerner in the mysterious

East. Women with slant eyes and sinister men in flowing robes. The sun had set and the light was failing fast but he could still make out the former splendor of the old building. The walls were painted deep red and the molded plaster bore remnants of gold leaf. It was like stepping back into the past.

He looked around. At the far end of the corridor there was a door. Freshly painted and furnished with a brass plate, it stood out like a shining beacon amongst the peeling paint and disintegrating wallpaper. It was the sole thing in the whole building that looked new and cared for. David made his way towards it and examined the brass plate, which was inscribed in stylish writing. *Mrs D Johnson. By Appointment Only.*

He rang the bell and waited. Then, when nothing happened, he thumped loudly. 'Mrs Johnson, are you there?' A minute passed and he banged again. This time there was movement. A heavy shuffling. It reached the other side of the door and was replaced by wheezing. He sensed an elderly presence watching him through the peephole and moved closer so she could get a better view.

'I'm David Paget.'

The wheezing turned into a violent asthmatic cough. David was grasped by an awful vision of the old woman collapsing and dying before he could get to her. Then the wheezing stopped and he heard her voice.

'Who did you say you was?' The voice was Australian.

'David Paget.'

'Who?'

'David Paget. I'm Charles Paget's nephew.'

A key turned, bolts were undone and the door flew open.

'Charlie sent you.'

She threw herself forward and grasped his hands.

'I can see the likeness. You're just like my Charlie.'

For an awful moment he thought she would kiss him.

Her eyes glazed over.

'I remember when we first met. It was at Bondi. He bought me a pavlova. I've always liked pavlovas ever since.'

He did his best to untangle himself from the old woman's grasp. Her skin was like wet parchment. He had never felt anything like it before. It was as if there were pockets of air beneath the surface. He tried not to show his revulsion.

'Sue Lynne asked me to bring you this.'

He yanked his hand free and took an envelope from his pocket.

'There's some money in American dollars.'

'Charlie's sent me some money.' Her face was ecstatic. 'I knew he would. I knew he wouldn't forget old Doris.'

David decided not to tell her Charlie had been dead for over a year.

'I've come to fetch something he left you.'

'Yes, my lovely.' She gave him a big kiss. 'I knew you had. I knew as soon as I saw you. I almost thought you was him. Then I remembered how old we was ... me and Charlie.'

She took his hand.

'You come with me. You come with old Doris.'

They entered a room with a veranda. Wind chimes hung overhead and a cockatoo sat on a perch. David sat on a sofa and immediately began to itch. He moved to a chair and watched as Doris went to a cabinet and produced a bottle.

'We used to serve bourbon and ice.'

She poured a colourless liquid into a glass

'Now this is the best we can offer a fine gentleman such as yourself.'

She affected an American accent. He knew it wasn't real. It was like the booze. He began to relax. Doris was obviously a tart. It was amusing to think that she was somehow mixed up with his family. His mother would have hysterics if she knew he was there. Just like she'd have hysterics if she knew he'd been sleeping with Sue Lynne.

The connection had to be Charlie. His mother didn't approve of her brother. On occasions, when he had done something that particularly displeased her, she would look at him and say "If you don't mend your ways, you will grow up to be like your Uncle Charles.". From an early age, he had developed a considerable regard for his mysterious uncle.

'There you are, my lovely.'

Doris placed a glass before him and stood back.

'I'm sorry we don't have no ice. But the electricity is off.'

David recognized the drink as fortified rice wine of the quality used in cooking. He picked up the glass and savoured the rough taste.

'Charlie liked a good drink.' Doris beamed at him.

David raised his glass and clinked it against hers.

'To Charlie!'

Her eyes were pink like a white rabbit's and her skin had a strange pallor that he had not seen before. As she withdrew her hand he saw the distinctive marks of skin cancer.

'Charlie said you was to come?'

David nodded.

'How is he? How's my Charlie?'

'He's very well and sorry he can't be here,' David lied.

'I real want to see him. He's the only one who cares,' she sobbed. 'It was him what had the door fixed. They came and smashed it down. Told us to get out. But they didn't count on Charlie. Charlie knows how to get things fixed. Charlie knows people.'

The candle on the table flickered and went out.

'But, he couldn't get them to turn the electricity back on.' The old woman fumbled with a lighter. 'Bloody shits. They turned that off ... and the water. We have to bring it up from the street now.'

Her arthritic fingers struggled to get the candle lit again.

'Mrs Johnson ... Doris.' David thought it time to approach her on the purpose of his visit. 'Charlie asked me to collect a suitcase he left with you.'

'Yes, my lovely. He did, didn't he? He told you to come and see old Doris.' She ran her hand over his close-cropped hair. 'You do look so much like him. You'll be his sister's boy ... the one that married a soldier and went to live in America.'

David nodded. 'My father was in the American Army. We used to live in New York.'

‘And that’s where you live now ... with my Charlie.’

‘No. I’m now living in Australia. My father was killed four years ago and my mother took me to live with my grandfather.’

‘But Charlie is in America?’

‘Yes,’ he lied again. ‘Charlie’s in America but he’s planning to return to Australia. He wants you to go back too. That’s why he needs the suitcase. There are some papers in it. He has to have them if he’s going to take you with him.’

‘Australia!’

Doris got to her feet as if in a dream. David watched tensely as she hobbled over to a dark recess and pulled at a pile of boxes.

‘I knew that’s why he brought it here,’ she coughed. ‘I knew he would use it to help old Doris. He told me so.’

The pile of boxes collapsed, sending up a cloud of dust. Unperturbed, she pushed her way amongst them and struggled to lift something heavy. David went to help.

‘Thank you, my lovely. You’re a real gentleman.’

He dragged the suitcase into the middle of the room. It was made of pigskin and reminded him of one his grandfather once owned. Here and there, beneath the grime, old steamship labels were stuck on top of one another. In the centre, some initials were embossed in gold. He rubbed at the dirt and revealed the letters T.J.L.

‘It was old Mr Lee’s suitcase,’ Doris explained. ‘He always insisted on the very best. I met him once. My mum took me to see him. He was ever so kind. He gave me a koala bear and some water wings.’

She prattled on and David’s mind began to wander. He thought about how he was going to open the suitcase and was wondering about the contents when the old woman’s mood suddenly changed. One moment she was reminiscing quietly, the next she was ranting on about the war and someone called Rosie.

‘Fucking Rosie. We wouldn’t be here in this stinking hole if it wasn’t for her ... fucking bitch.’

‘Fu King Losie.’

The cockatoo swung violently on its perch and screeched back at her.

Doris got up from her chair.

‘Yes, my love. You know all about her ... don’t you?’

‘Fu King Losie.’

‘Don’t you worry. Charlie’s going to sort out the bitch.’ Doris picked up the bird. ‘Fucking snob. She thinks she’s too good for us. But it wasn’t like that when we was Curt’n Girls. She wasn’t so fucking proud then ... not when we was making money ... not when we was Curt’n Girls!’

David grasped the suitcase and made for the door.

‘Fucking Rosie.’

Her voice echoed after him as he ran down the stairs.

* * * * *

The hotel room was small and dingy. David dumped the suitcase on the bed and went into the shower to freshen up. Two minutes later he was in clean clothes and ready to start work. The case was locked and the catches refused to budge when

he probed them with his dive knife. He gave up and sliced through the side with the sharp blade.

He was reminded of the time he and Tim shot a wild boar in the Brindabella Ranges near Canberra. Tim was his business partner. They had set up a dive shop together. At least, that was how David saw it. The reality was somewhat different. David had quit university and his grandfather had put up the money for him to go into the dive industry. Twenty-eight-year-old Tim had been recruited as a minder. He was called a partner but was, in fact, an employee. It was the way the Pagets operated. People and things got called by wrong names. In time, David would come to understand that.

Tim said the feral pigs were doing a heap of damage to the environment and it was their ecological duty to cull a few and restock the freezer. David couldn't agree more. They used a crossbow to bring down a big boar and opened its belly with a hunting knife. On that occasion, entrails spilt onto the ground. This time a cascade of packages fell out, followed by a stream of white powder. David ignored the powder and turned his attention to the packages.

They were wrapped in faded paper and looked old. He opened one and found photographs in the strange brown colour, popular a long time ago. From the buildings and trees, he guessed they were taken in Australia. Most of the people looked Chinese. Other packages contained papers ... official looking papers. One caught his eye. Yellow with age and typed on an old-fashioned typewriter, it bore the official crest of the Commonwealth of Australia and the heading TOP SECRET.

It was then that he noticed his fingers were swelling. They had started to itch when he cut open the suitcase and he guessed it had something to do with the white powder. Now, the discomfort was too acute to ignore. He went into the shower, washed his hands thoroughly and returned to his task. Soon he was back in the shower, scrubbing furiously.

He knew he had allergy problems. In America it had started as hay fever. When he got to Australia it went away for a while and he took up rock climbing. Then the local pollens got to him and he gave up rock climbing for scuba diving. This attack was worse than anything he had encountered before. He removed his diving gloves from his bag and put them on.

Sue Lynne said there was a plastic folder in the case. He found it. The cover was transparent and he could see satellite maps and aerial photographs inside. They had belonged to Charlie and were images of coral reefs.

The next package was sealed with gummed paper tape. It disintegrated when he picked it up and a stack of photographs fell out. David expected to see more long dresses and children in sailor suits. Instead, he found pictures of a very different sort. A smile crossed his face and he chuckled as he thumbed through the stack of black-and-white prints.

The location was always the same. A room with a double bed and wallpaper covered in pictures of Sydney Harbor Bridge. And the pose was the same too but with amusing variations.

There were two girls. One was in her twenties, with dark hair and narrow eyes. The other was no more than fifteen and had pale skin and odd-looking eyes. It occurred to him that the younger girl was Doris.

He moved away from the suitcase and went to sit in a chair, aware that the white powder was still aggravating his allergy problem.

The girls were usually naked although the younger one often kept her panties on. They looked pretty good to him ... a view evidently shared by their male companions, judging from the expressions on their faces. David wondered if all men looked silly when they were having sex.

In each photograph the younger girl held the man's erect (or not so erect) penis and the older girl held his head so that he looked straight into the camera. David flicked through the prints, marvelling at the variety of the human form. He turned over one and found the back covered in writing. *18 Aug. 1942. Col. JP Samuelson Jr. US Army Corps.*

He turned over another but before he could read it a wave of nausea hit him. He hurried to the shower, fumbled with the taps and collapsed onto the tiles, too sick to get up.

Chapter 4

Parcels.

It was 7.30 am and pouring with rain, heavy by Canberra standards. Humphrey Hansen drove into the parking area beside a large government building and hunted for a suitable place to leave his car. He was having trouble with the ignition. The battery had passed its use-by date and he was reluctant to spend money on a new one. A patch of sloping ground met his requirements. He often parked there and had developed a knack for getting the car started by running forward in neutral and engaging second gear when he'd got up enough momentum.

He left the car and hurried over the wet grass beneath a black umbrella, splashing short-sightedly through puddles. He was a big man. Some might say fat. His sandy-coloured hair showed no trace of grey and his face still bore the childhood freckles that stubbornly refused to leave him. The face was boyish but his movements were those of an overweight, middle-aged man.

A row of lifts greeted him when he entered the building. Monotonous in their uniformity, they epitomized everything Humphrey hated about the public service. Cramped minds and an obsession with neatness. He ignored the lifts and headed for the fire stairs. It was part of his new fitness regime. Tim had told him to get more exercise and he wasn't going to argue with that. Tim was the senior partner at the Adventure Dive Centre.

He had recently enrolled in the Centre's introductory dive course and was determined to do the right thing by his new friends. For years he had researched the lives of men of action and had written numerous reports and articles about them. It was thrilling to think he was not too old to join their ranks. He mounted the stairs with solid determination, covering the first floor with ease and the second with some difficulty. Then palpitations of the heart caused him to wonder if

he was being entirely sensible. He trudged up the next few flights and left the stairwell at the sixth floor, figuring he'd had enough exercise for one day.

There was no one about at that early hour. Only the Narcotics Bureau, which occupied the upper floors, operated under the early bird regime. It was one of the few things that pleased Humphrey about his job. A minute passed. His heart rate subsided and he was beginning to regain his breath when a lift arrived. He made his way to it expecting to find a lady with a vacuum cleaner. Instead, he encountered the two people he least wanted to meet.

'G'day.'

He set down his briefcase and nodded towards the two men.

'What's the matter, Humph? Did you get out at the wrong floor?'

The voice belonged to Rodney O'Neill.

'I was starting a ...'

He began to describe his new fitness routine but was interrupted before he could proceed further.

'We were just talking about you, Humphrey.'

The second voice belonged to Cecil Sparrow, who headed their organization.

'I was saying to Principal Investigator O'Neill that you could handle the cataloguing of the Sydney parcels.'

Humphrey stared at him vacantly.

'The Sydney parcels?'

'If you'd been at the happy hour, Humph, you'd know all about them,' Rodney O'Neill said. 'We wondered why you weren't there.'

He had a singsong way of talking which Humphrey found irritating.

'I was at my scuba class,' Humphrey replied firmly, aware that failure to attend the Bureau's happy hour was a cardinal sin and an obstacle to promotion.

'The little sniffer dogs almost passed out,' Rodney gave a high-pitched laugh. 'One had to be given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.'

Humphrey regarded Rodney as a twit.

'Why did they almost pass out?'

'It was the parcels, Humph. They were laced with snow. It was falling out of them.'

'The parcels?'

Humphrey turned towards Cecil Sparrow, hoping to get more sense out of him. Instead he received a perfunctory command.

'I shall instruct Alan to deliver the parcels to your office.'

Humphrey noted that Cecil always referred to staff in the inner core by their titles, whereas support staff, like himself, were called by their given names. It didn't bother him. He regarded the Narcotics Bureau as no more than a stepping stone to higher things. The lift approached the eleventh floor. He stabbed out a finger and stopped it there. As he picked up his briefcase, he saw the heavy look of disapproval on Cecil Sparrow's face. Evidently, he was expected to proceed to the top floor with his superiors and then return to his own.

He entered his office, slumped down at his desk and removed a bundle of papers from his briefcase. They were the proofs of a book he had been commissioned to write on the ancient Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, and

had nothing to do with the Bureau. He was working away busily when the door opened and Alan Pulnitz appeared.

‘Good morning, Professor.’

Humphrey hated the term. He’d spent most of his working life in universities and wanted to be rid of the academic image. It was an obstacle to advancement in the new and exciting world he sought to enter. Being well educated was far worse than any failure to attend happy hours. People got scared when they found you could speak half-a-dozen languages. They described you as a specialist. That meant you were proficient in one area and a total imbecile in all others.

Alan wheeled in a trolley.

‘We’ve decontaminated them, Professor. You can examine them in safety.’

‘Alan.’ Humphrey sat back. ‘Tell me about the parcels. All I know is that a little sniffer dog had to be given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.’

Alan placed some packages on his desk.

‘Where were you all weekend?’

‘Down at Eden ... scuba diving.’

‘You are a lucky boy. I was here in a rubber suit and respirator, cleaning up this lot. They arrived in Sydney on a flight from Hong Kong.’

Alan unloaded the remainder of the trolley.

‘By the way,’ he grinned. ‘There are some interesting images. I’d like to know what you think of them.’

Humphrey had no difficulty finding them. The photographs were in a plastic bag with a label in Alan’s handwriting. PARENTAL GUIDANCE RECOMMENDED. He consigned the label to the wastepaper basket and spent the next half-hour examining the contents of the bag. Turning to his computer, he began to type.

KS 20/01/02 A1 97 photographs (10cm x 15cm). All taken in same location, all showing male persons in sexually compromising circumstances. Writing on rear in black ink, by a single hand, records subject’s name. Most senior US military personnel. Three Australian and two British. Strong indication that the material was used for blackmail purposes.

The reference to blackmail took him beyond his brief. As a research officer, he was required to describe and report. Interpretation was the preserve of those chosen for that role. They had their offices on the top floor and were described as analysts.

Chapter 5

Birthday Party.

David trudged up the slope, feeling tired and hungry. He’d got back to Canberra with scarcely a cent in his pocket and had used the last of his money to phone Tim at the dive shop. The phone hadn’t answered and he’d walked four dreary miles through pouring rain to the Paget residence in the exclusive suburb of Redhill.

A sense of gloom crept upon him as he approached the family home ... if it could be called that. His father had been killed when he was sixteen and his mother had taken him to Australia to live with her father. She was timid and highly protective. His grandfather, long retired from government service, had been one of the highest-ranking public officials of his day.

David reached the gate and stopped in his tracks. Expensive vehicles crammed the front yard and more were visible at the rear of the house. Then he remembered that it was his grandfather's birthday. He trudged up the driveway and was nearing the front door when he saw his mother's face at the window. She ran into the porch.

'It's the darling boy.'

He winced at the sound of her voice. He had suffered agonies at school being called 'darling boy'. Why did she have to treat him like a sippy six-year-old?

He stormed past.

'David. Darling. What's the matter?'

He ignored her and went upstairs to his room, locking the door behind him. His wet clothes came off. He threw his backpack onto the bed and stood naked beside it rummaging through the contents. The item he was looking for was at the bottom ... a large book in a plastic bag. He removed it and dragged the bed to one side. The wall had a loose panel. It came away to reveal a cavity stacked with girly magazines. David put the bag inside, replaced the panel and returned the bed to its original position.

He was still fazed out. Whatever had affected him in Hong Kong was long lasting. His nerves were on edge and he felt dizzy. Worst of all, his recollection of events was poor. He remembered Doris' flat but everything after that was hazy. One gnawing question kept praying on his mind.

What had he done with the contents of the suitcase?

They were too risky to take back with him so he'd packed them in parcels and posted them to Australia. He was certain of that. But what address had he used? They should have been sent to Tim's old rooming house. Could he have written Tim's new address on them by mistake? The thought was disturbing.

He retreated into the shower and let the water flow over him. It warmed his soul and helped to calm his body but he couldn't stay forever. The water was getting cold and he had to face the grim reality of being back home. There wasn't a choice. It was his grandfather's birthday party and it was a while since he'd seen him. The old man would be mortified if he didn't show up.

He surveyed the garments on the rail that served as his wardrobe. Most dated from his schooldays. After some consideration he selected a pair of dark trousers and a white shirt. His mother had bought them when he was seventeen. He was slimmer then, not so heavily muscled, and he'd looked smart. Now he looked like a scruffily dressed waiter called from the beach at short notice. David didn't care. The clothes belonged to the past.

The house was built in the grand old style and had two wings. One presented an impressive face to the world. The other was tucked away at the back. David's room was there, above the former stables, in what had once been servants' quarters. He left it and walked to the top of the stairs. The hallway stretched out elegantly

below, tiled and lined with Chinese vases. The drawing room door was open and he could hear voices. Elderly voices.

'Many happy returns, Sir George.'

'You look younger every day, Paget, old chap.'

They didn't merely belong to a different generation ... they belonged to a different world. David descended the stairs reluctantly and surveyed the sea of dark suits and pastel-coloured dresses. The stench of old people was overpowering. A nauseous mixture of mothballs and expensive perfumes aggravated his allergy problems and made him want to scratch. He was contemplating his next move when his mother suddenly appeared before him.

'Look, everybody. It's the darling boy.'

Heads turned. David didn't doubt there would be retired judges and former cabinet ministers amongst them. They glanced briefly in his direction then resumed their conversations. It was painfully obvious that no one knew who he was or cared. He took a step into the room and stood with growing embarrassment as his mother prattled on, unaware that no one was listening.

The refreshment table was beside the door and he decided to proceed no further. A pretty girl was serving drinks. He ordered a beer and was soon in conversation with her. Suddenly she froze.

'Agh. Agh. The party boy's seen us.'

David saw his grandfather coming towards them through the crowd. The old man was dressed in a pinstriped suit and college tie that he reserved for special occasions and looked distinguished despite a slight stoop. He reached David's side and grasped his hand warmly.

'I'm glad you got back in time for my party, David.'

'I'm glad to be here, Grandfather.'

David was genuinely pleased. The old man was unwell when he left for overseas; now he looked much fitter. He turned towards the girl, who had retreated to the other side of the table.

'This is Joan. She's a marine science student.'

Sir George put on his most engaging smile. 'You're earning money in your spare time?'

The girl nodded.

'That's admirable. No one should feel humbled by providing a service. I applaud you for what you are doing. I also applaud your choice of subject. You should get to know my grandson. He's interested in marine things although more on the diving side.'

He turned to David. 'What's that awful stuff you're drinking?'

'Beer, Grandfather.'

The old man reached for a bottle of whisky and poured a generous glass. 'Try this.' He handed the glass to David and led him to one side.

'So. You've just completed a round-the-world trip. When I was your age, only the very rich could afford such luxuries. I was lucky because I worked for the government and they paid for my overseas trips. Perhaps I should say the taxpayers did.' He gave a little chuckle and was about to say more when a voice cut him short.

'Was your journey profitable, David?'

David turned and found himself staring into a heavily powdered face, surmounted by a beehive structure of dark hair. It was his Aunt Grace. Although more of his grandfather's generation, she had once been married to his Uncle Charles.

'Profitable ... Aunt Grace?'

'Gracie means did you get anything out of it,' his grandfather said. 'You went to America to take a look at the dive shops.'

'Oh, yes. That was very useful.'

'Did you go anywhere else?' Grace asked.

David felt a tinge of alarm.

'I had a look at Disneyland, Aunt Grace.'

'Did you visit any other places?' Her tone was inquisitorial.

'I dropped into San Francisco to see some old school friends.'

'Anywhere else?'

'Well. New York. That's where the plane landed.'

'I see.'

She nodded, as if satisfied her questions had produced the desired result.

As a small boy David had been terrified by Grace and he had not warmed to her over the years. She never ceased to remind him of a Manchu empress in an old movie in which people lost their heads if they showed disrespect for the ruling class.

A silence ensued.

David raised his glass and was about to toast his grandfather when a grey Porsche entered the driveway. The car stopped. A man and child got out and walked towards the house.

The little girl was neatly dressed and very pretty. Her long blond hair, high cheekbones and jet-black eyes gave her an almost elfin appearance. She was Sue Lynne's daughter and her father was David's cousin, Harald. The latter gave David a chilling glance.

'Uncle David.'

The little girl reached out a hand but her father continued to drag her along.

'Anne. My sweet.'

Grace bent down to kiss her.

'Say hullo to Grandmother,' Harald prompted.

'Hullo, Grandmother.'

The child waved in Grace's direction. Then her eyes lit up as David's mother appeared. 'Auntie Cecilia,' she broke away and ran towards her.

Harald stared at his daughter, wrapped in Cecilia's embrace, and directed his fury at his cousin.

'David. I want to speak to you.'

'Okay. Sure ...'

'Not here ... upstairs.'

Harald turned to Sir George.

'Get them out of here.'

To David's surprise, the old man did as he was told. Turning away obediently, he led Anne and Cecilia into the drawing room. Grace shut the door and stood beside it like a sentry.

David folded his arms. 'What's bugging you, Harald?'

'You've been shafting my wife.'

David feigned surprise. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You bloody well do.'

David stepped back and Harald pursued him up the stairs.

It was a ridiculous situation. Harald was half his size. Pale and anaemic. But it had not always been like that. David vividly remembered when, as a small child, Harald had pulled off his swimsuit and abused him. Harald would have been about the same age as he was now. David couldn't understand how anyone could behave like that. He thought of Anne and what might be happening to her.

He stared at his cousin. 'What do you want?'

'You know what I want.'

'No. You must tell me.'

'You've been shafting my wife.'

'You've already said that, Harald.'

'Don't play the smart-arse with me.' Harald grabbed David by the shirt. 'If you are prepared to sign a document which I have here, saying you've had carnal relations with Sue Lynne, then we can come to a deal.'

'What's the deal, Harald?'

'I'll pay off the loan you got from Grandfather for the dive boats.'

'Why should you want to do that?'

'What's that to you? Do you want the fucking money or don't you?'

'I still don't know what you're on about.'

'Yes. You fucking do. I know you've been shackled up with that bitch.'

He pulled David towards him. So close, David could smell the aftershave.

'Listen, David. I know what you're up to. I saw how you and your stupid mother behaved towards my daughter.'

David glanced at Grace who seemed torn between pacifying Harald and preventing anyone from leaving the drawing room and witnessing the confrontation.

'You fancy Anne. Just like you fancy her mother.'

Harald pulled David off balance and something snapped in David's head. His vision clouded and his fists shot out, striking Harald in the chest. Two sharp blows, landed in quick succession, sent him crashing down. He slumped in a heap in the hall, crying that his back was broken. The drawing room door flew open. Elderly faces appeared and elderly voices expressed horror and consternation.

Chapter 6

Tim.

Smoke filled the air as Tim moved deftly between the projector beam and the pine panel he was crafting. His shadow mingled with the image of a surfer on a

giant wave. He had a soldering iron and was applying it in a way another artist might use a brush, scorching lines on the wooden surface.

Art, scuba diving and women were Tim's passions. He often joked that he could go without food but would die if he were denied the three basic essentials of life. And he enjoyed more than average success in finding them. A certain sort of woman found Tim irresistible. Others found him amusing. Few disliked him. He was a natural clown forever cracking jokes, often at his own expense.

Thickset with ginger hair and short stocky legs, Tim looked as if nothing would upset him. But the tough appearance hid a vulnerable side to his nature.

He put down the soldering iron and stepped back to admire his work. Things were going well. He now had a decent place to live. It wasn't flashy but it was roomy. There was plenty of space for him and his young mate, Dave. They had separate rooms with their own en suites, which was a convenient arrangement when female guests came to stay, not that Dave had any. And there was a rumpus room that doubled as an art studio. The walls were covered in his paintings and Dave's photographs. Tim glanced amongst them and could scarcely believe his good luck.

Two years earlier he'd been doing odd jobs to make a living. He'd been chucked out of the army and was living in a cheap rooming house. Then a lucky break brought him back on course. A rich family was looking for someone to manage a dive business. His credentials couldn't have been better. He'd had some of the best underwater training the Australian Armed Forces could provide. To his amazement, his prospective employers didn't care a sod about why he'd left the army. They were interested in what he could do and how he would relate to their grandson.

Tim had no problems with that. He knew his diving skills were good and he liked Dave. The kid had a heap going for him. Admittedly, there was a bit of growing up to be done but that was to be expected. Dave was only twenty. He was eight years younger than himself. It wasn't surprising they had differences.

'Tim.'

He heard banging at the door.

'Davo? Is that you?'

'Let me in.'

Tim unlocked the door and David stumbled inside. It was still pouring with rain and water dripped from his wet T-shirt. He peeled it off and clambered out of his soggy jeans. Tim pushed a cold beer into his hands.

'What's the matter?'

'Everything.' David reached for a towel. 'I just don't know what's been happening to me.'

'Didn't it work out with Sue Lynne?'

'It wasn't simple like I thought.'

'You mean ... you didn't get the maps?'

'I got'em. But it's much more difficult than I thought.'

David wrapped the towel about his waist and sat down. The first beer helped and the second was even better. He told Tim about Sue Lynne and her smart flat in New York but felt restrained when it came to talking about their relationship. A few weeks earlier, twenty-year-old David would have bragged to twenty-eight-year-

old Tim about his sexual exploits. He no longer felt the need. Having done it was different from pretending to have done it. Instead, he told Tim about the suitcase, about Doris and a cockatoo that shouted Fucking Rosie, about the powder and the parcels ... and about his confrontation with Harald.

‘Do you think you hurt him real bad?’

‘He was taken away in an ambulance.’

‘That sounds bad.’

‘Too right,’ David agreed. ‘My mother went into hysterics and my grandfather was real upset.’

‘Christ. D’yer think he’ll take back the loan?’

David looked glum. ‘Don’t know. We won’t have the boats if he does.’

‘That makes it all the more important we find the gold.’ Tim took a swig of beer. ‘Let’s have a look at Charlie’s maps.’

David went to his backpack and returned with a plastic folder. ‘I brought ‘em back in my luggage. They didn’t have any powder so I figured it would be safe.’ He removed some satellite images and spread them out on the table securing the corners with beer bottles.

Tim recognized the photographs. They’d been taken from outer space and were in a format used by the armed forces. They were the raw data the military had relied upon, only a few years earlier, when he was in the army. He wondered how Charlie had got hold of them. ‘There’s Cooktown,’ he pointed to a spot on the North Queensland coast.

‘That’s right,’ David nodded. ‘It’s small so it doesn’t stand out real sharp. But it was much bigger when Tong Yee was there.’

Tim knew all about Cooktown but Tong Yee was something different.

‘Is that his name?’

‘Yeah. He changed it to Thomas Lee when he became Australian. I’ve got a photo of him.’ David rummaged in the folder and pulled out a photograph of a sharply featured young man in expensive Western dress: high collar, embroidered waistcoat, watch chain, brandy glass and blond girl.

Tim was impressed. He stared back and forth between the girl’s bulging attributes and the powerfully built young man beside her. Tong Yee was the sort of guy he could understand. He looked really fit and his choice of women was stunning.

‘He could get a job as a film star if he was alive today.’

‘Yeah,’ David nodded. ‘One of those kung fu movies. Tong Yee was a breath-hold diver. Charlie reckons he could have gone down to a hundred feet.’

‘When was it taken?’

‘About 1890.’

‘Jesus.’ Tim lent forward. ‘That young sheila would be 130 years old by now ... and she’s giving me a rise.’

‘From what Sue Lynne says, the girl was probably a prostitute. She says the prostitutes came from England, Scotland and Ireland, the brandy and the posh clothes came from France and the gold came out of the streams.’

‘How did the Chinese fit in?’

'They went into the goldfields like everyone else. Australia was a British colony then. You didn't have all the restrictions like you have now. Sue Lynne says you just turned up and started to pan for gold.'

'So what's all this about him having to hide the gold out on the reef?'

'It was the Tongs,' David explained. 'They were like the Mafia. They were fighting one another. Tong Yee was on the losing side. He took the gold and hid it at sea.'

'How much?'

'Sue Lynne says about half-a-million bucks.'

'That would be worth a bit of effort.'

'Certainly would,' David agreed. 'It would pay off the loan.'

'So where did he hide it?'

'Somewhere around here.' David pulled the map towards him and drew a circle round a large reef.

'Shit. Mate. You'll have to do better than that or we'll never find the gold. I thought you said Charlie had a detailed map.'

David looked despondent. 'He drew one but I can't find it now. It was there when I unpacked the suitcase. Now it's gone.'

'You're joking.'

'No. It's not anywhere. I must have put it in one of the parcels I sent to your old place. I can't remember ... I was so fazed out by that powder.'

'Okay.' Tim got to his feet. 'We'll go and get them.'

'What do you mean?'

'We'll go round and collect the parcels.'

'Don't you think we should wait?'

'No way.' Tim grabbed the keys of the dive shop van. 'We need to get round there before some bastard nicks off with them.'

* * * * *

The rooming house was in a rundown part of town. Tim drove into the yard and switched off the engine. David sat beside him in the passenger seat and stared apprehensively out of the window. Tim saw his face.

'What's the matter, mate? You look like you've dated a sheila and don't know what to do with her.'

'I'm not sure we're going about this the right way. I don't think we should just dash in there. We should think it out first.'

'Mate, you've lost your nerve.' Tim reached for a sheet of plastic. 'All I'm going to do is go in there and have a look ... that's all.'

He pulled the plastic over his head and dashed through the pouring rain. The building had hardly changed. The common room was as dirty as he remembered it. The dustbin overflowed and coffee mugs littered the table. A seedy-looking character was slumped in the only armchair.

'G'day.' Tim nodded in his direction. 'D'yer know where Kevin is?'

'Down the pub like he always is,' the other replied.

'There's supposed to be some parcels for a mate of mine from Hong Kong.'

'Try over there.' The man cocked a thumb over his shoulder.

Tim went to a table piled with unclaimed mail. A parcel with Chinese stamps was balanced on top.

‘There should be some others.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ the man grunted. ‘You’d better speak to Kev about it in the morning.’

Tim grabbed the parcel and hurried back to the van, half-blinded by the rain. He didn’t look back and didn’t see the man jump up from the armchair. Nor did he see him slip out through a side door and run towards a motorbike.

* * * * *

Back in the flat, Tim stripped off his wet shirt and went to the fridge for more beer. On the other side of the table, David stared apprehensively at the brown paper parcel, laid out on the bare boards like a hunting trophy.

‘Too easy.’ Tim placed a beer in his hand. ‘Went like a dream.’

David didn’t share Tim’s enthusiasm.

‘I’m not sure we went about this the right way.’

‘It was your idea to post ‘em back.’

‘Yes. But I didn’t think we’d just burst in there.’

‘We didn’t burst in.’

Tim ripped the parcel open and tipped out the contents.

‘Okay. Where’s Charlie’s treasure map?’

David surveyed the assortment of items. They looked familiar but not as he remembered packing them.

‘What’s this?’

Tim held up a pack of photographs.

‘Jesus. Just look at those boobs.’

David felt uneasy. He had slipped one of the pornographic prints into his wallet as a sort of memento. He was certain the rest had stayed together, tied in a tight bundle. So what were six loose prints doing in the parcel?

‘What’s the matter? Have your hormones stopped rising?’ Tim pointed to the plump, pallid, doe-eyed girl, clasping the considerable organ of an overweight middle-aged male.

‘That’s Doris,’ David tried to gather his thoughts. ‘She’s the one I got the suitcase from.’

‘You mean the one with the suitcase?’

‘Yeah.’

‘She doesn’t look more than fifteen.’

‘She’s a lot older now,’ David replied abstractly.

‘The other bird’s a bit severe.’ Tim pointed to the young woman supporting the man’s head. ‘I reckon I’d go easy with her.’ He took a second look. ‘Who’s the fella?’

‘His name will be on the back,’ David said.

Tim turned over the print.

‘Colonel Samuelson.’

A broad smile developed on his face.

‘Colonel Bigus Dickus.’

He turned to the next print and commented on the small size of the displayed male part.

‘Quarter Master Sergeant Pennyfather.’

He turned over another.

'Captain Slim.'

'Ooh. This one seems to have suffered an injury ... Major Boomerang.'

The Bishop and The Rabbi followed.

David's patience failed. 'For Christ's sake. Stop mucking around.'

'What's the matter, Davo?'

'I still can't find Charlie's maps.'

'The what?'

'The maps. Have you forgotten what all this is about?'

'Cool it.'

'Don't tell me to cool it.'

David rose and Tim was suddenly aware of his young friend's superior size.

'Sorry, mate.'

'The maps aren't here. I've sorted through everything.' David pushed the contents of the parcel to one side. 'I know exactly what they look like. Charlie read Tong Yee's journal. He spoke Chinese. He worked out where the gold was hidden. He marked out a search area. I saw it and now it's gone.'

David buried his head in his hands.

'I stuffed up. We'll never find the gold.'

'Relax. It's not as bad as you think.'

'Yes, it is.' David looked up tearfully. 'We don't know what Tong Yee wrote in his journal. We can't read Chinese.'

Tim placed a hand on David's shoulder.

'Mate. All we have to do is find someone who can speak Chinese.'

'How are we going to do that?'

'Easy.' Tim reached for the phone. 'I know just the man.'

Chapter 7

Just the man.

Humphrey drove into the yard at the rear of the dive shop and looked for a suitable spot to leave his car. Tim had phoned the previous evening with a most generous offer. His young partner had just returned from overseas and would like to meet him. Humphrey was invited to take part in an excursion to Montague Island, a famous dive spot off the coast. It was the last thing he'd expected. Two weeks earlier, he had failed the open water segment of his dive course and fully expected to pay for the additional tuition needed to obtain his diving license. Now they were offering to do it free of charge. He hoped he would be able to show his appreciation in some way.

He found a spot on a slope and parked the car there. The handbrake had started to give trouble and it seemed prudent to leave the vehicle in reverse gear. As a further precaution he hunted around for something to put in front of the wheels. He found a piece of wood and was bent over, pushing it in place, when a young man appeared.

'You'll be Dr Hansen.'

Humphrey looked up. He'd heard a lot about David from the girls in the dive club and had no difficulty recognizing him. He certainly lived up to his reputation. But it wasn't just good looks. David had a most engaging manner. He picked up Humphrey's bags and carried them towards a Toyota Landcruiser.

He took an instant liking to the young man. David had a pleasant manner and showed tremendous enthusiasm for diving. In that respect he was like Tim. But, in other, David was very different. He was much younger and clearly came from a different social background. He was also of a more serious disposition. David thought before he spoke and had the ability to speak in sentences, a skill that Tim had never mastered.

'Tim tells me you work at the university,' David remarked casually.

'I used to. I'm now a public servant. It's rather boring but I keep up my interests.'

'Tim said you speak Chinese. He said you carried on quite a conversation with the waiters at the Golden Dragon.'

'I speak some Cantonese as well as Mandarin,' Humphrey replied modestly.

'A friend of mine has a diary written in Chinese by one of her ancestors. She'd like to know what's in it.'

'I'd be happy to oblige,' Humphrey smiled. 'You have been most generous, inviting me out on this trip which is meant for qualified divers and not learners like myself.'

'All part of our service.'

'But you have gone beyond what is normally expected. I did make some very silly mistakes in the open water part of the course. I fully understand why I failed.'

David placed the bags in the Landcruiser. 'That doesn't matter. The important thing is to train you to the required standard so you can dive safely ...'

David continued to talk as they walked towards the dive shop but Humphrey wasn't listening. His attention was on a powerful female voice coming from inside.

'Okay. You fellas. Who's next?'

David pushed open the door and waved to an athletic young woman who was handing out scuba equipment. He turned to Humphrey.

'You've not met our new divemaster ... have you, Humph?'

Humphrey suspected he had. Janet Pulnitz was an undercover agent for the Narcotics Bureau and the sister of his colleague, Alan Pulnitz. She worked part-time as a martial arts instructor: a job that provided cover for her main occupation. Now, it seemed she'd joined the dive industry.

Janet glanced up when they entered but her face registered no trace of recognition. Humphrey stood in line and waited for his turn.

'Jan.' Tim placed a hand on her shoulder. 'This is Humph. I told you about him.'

'Hi. Humph.'

Janet held up the flat of her hand and Humphrey smacked his against it.

'Hi. Jan.'

She usually referred to him as Humphles. He found Humph far more acceptable. She kitted him out with a wetsuit, weight-belt, buoyancy jacket, regulator and all the other items needed in diving. They talked continuously, neither showing the slightest sign that they knew one another.

* * * * *

Humphrey took his gear to the Landcruiser and found Tim and David waiting for him. They were to head off first. Other staff members, including their latest recruit, would follow later. He squeezed into a space on the back seat next to a medical unit and a box with David's name on it. Tim jumped into the driver's seat and they pulled off, towing a trailer carrying a big inflatable boat and two huge outboard motors.

Humphrey spoke first. 'David tells me I can repay your kindness.'

'There's nothing to repay,' David said. 'But my friend would be very pleased if you could help us with this.'

He reached into a bag and took out a document which he handed to Humphrey. In the rear mirror, Tim saw the expression on Humphrey's face.

'What's the matter, Humph?'

'It's not quite what I expected.' Humphrey fumbled for his reading spectacles. 'Some of it is written on handmade paper in pre-revolutionary script.'

'Do you think it's for real?'

'Oh. It's real. Little doubt about that.'

'Can you read it, Humph?'

'Yes. As David says, it's pages from a diary or a journal.'

'What does it say?'

'It's about the payment of money to people in China.'

There was a pause while Humphrey examined the text. He felt uneasy. There was a disturbing resemblance between the papers in his hand and some of the documents he had been examining that same day at work, which could explain Janet Pulnitz's presence.

David handed him another sheet. Humphrey felt he was being tested. They wanted to be sure he could do the translating job before letting him into their confidence. He scrutinized the sheet and enthused over it.

'This really is extremely interesting material. The writer was here in Australia on the Palmer River goldfields before Federation ... fascinating, quite fascinating.'

He wondered if he was overplaying the role of the doddering academic but needn't have worried. He got the result he was looking for.

'Humph. We want to let you into a secret ...'

David began slowly. He didn't say much at first but, after a while, he was pouring forth a wealth of information. Humphrey sifted it cautiously. Most was implausible. Some was revealing. Step by step he built up a picture of a middle-class Canberra boy rebelling against his family background. There was nothing unusual in that. In David's case it had led to some very dangerous liaisons.

* * * * *

They arrived at a camping ground near the coastal town of Narooma about two hours drive from Canberra. It was surrounded by tall stands of spotted gums and Humphrey was pleased to see that the tent sites were well clear of the big trees. As a little boy he'd tried to explain to his mother that trees in Australia are different from trees in Denmark. Unlike Danish trees, Australian trees don't grow up like beanstalks and poke out branches when they get to a convenient height. Australian trees have lower branches from the start and shed them as they grow

up. That is why you should never camp under a tree in Australia. His mother had refused to listen to these words of wisdom from her small son, insisting that shade and proximity to the toilet block outweighed all other considerations.

Humphrey helped David erect a tent and watched as the rest of the diving party arrived. They were travelling in their own vehicles and it soon became apparent that their numbers would soon be depleted by two. Tim's new dive assistant had reserved a room in a motel and craved his company.

Humphrey watched the pair together. They were well-matched. Tim had been discharged from the army following an assault on an officer. Janet was under investigation for using excessive force when arresting a drug dealer.

If Tim was to be believed, he had not assaulted the officer: He had merely taken retribution. According to Tim, the man kicked him out of a helicopter in full scuba gear. The water was not deep enough and he suffered a dislocated collarbone. Three months later he had his revenge during a brawl in a nightclub.

If Janet was to be believed, drug dealers got off too lightly when taken before the courts and additional measures were needed to correct their antisocial behaviour. The dealer in question was a repeat offender with a history of selling drugs to children. Janet claimed she acted in self-defence. Others argued differently.

In appearance, she bore a faint family likeness to her brother, Alan. But the resemblance ended there. Dull, solid Alan had gone straight from adolescence to middle age. As far as Humphrey was concerned, Janet occupied a halfway house in the normal transition from child to adult. She had a little girl's fascination for dressing up and a big girl's obsession with adult themes. Humphrey never knew what she would look like next. Today she wore blue shorts and a T-shirt emblazoned with the dive centre's logo. On other occasions he'd seen her in full biker gear or dressed as a junkie.

But no amount of dressing up could hide Janet's extraordinary physique. She had the long, lithe limbs of a panther and a speed of attack to go with it. Humphrey knew her as the winner of a string of martial arts contests. He wondered what it would be like to spend a night in bed with a woman who was capable of dislocating every bone in your body. He shuddered to think of the damage she might do in a moment of unrestrained passion.

With Tim absent, David was occupied with arrangements for the coming dive trip. Humphrey took the opportunity to go off and sit at a table beneath a flame tree. A spotlight illuminated the wooden boards and he was able to read Tong Yee's journal with few distractions apart from some huge moths attracted by the light.

David's account of how he had acquired the journal was disturbing. There was a Chinese auntie who wasn't really an aunt, an aged prostitute living out her last years in Hong Kong, a cockatoo that screamed obscenities, a suitcase, secret societies, hidden gold and a treasure map. It was totally unbelievable.

The obvious explanation was that David had been duped. He might be very mature for his years but he was very vulnerable in the dangerous world beyond Canberra's leafy suburbs.

„*Tong Yee and the Tongs.*“ Humphrey chuckled. Surely they could have found a better name.

He thumbed through the papers. They were undoubtedly genuine. He had seen attempts to forge old Chinese documents and knew how difficult it was. As he continued to read he became more and more intrigued. The journal told a mixed story. In places there were accounts of money sent to families in China and of bones returned to grieving relatives. The writer was evidently an office bearer in one of the mutual support societies common at that time. They were as different as chalk from cheese. Some were worthy of the highest accolades. Others were criminal organizations. He was deeply engrossed when David appeared beside him.

'Is it good reading?'

'Most definitely.'

'Any problems?'

'Only these insects.' Humphrey waved a hand at the mouse-sized moths dragging their huge abdomens over the table. 'I believe they're called goat moths. If my memory serves me right, their caterpillars bore holes in trees. They're the witchetty grubs the Aboriginals eat. I had some once and they're rather good.'

They talked about the moths, bush walking, Chinese writing and ancient Chinese weapons. David clearly enjoyed his company.

'Would you like a beer?'

'That sounds an excellent idea.'

David went to an icebox and returned with two cans. He pulled off the rings and handed one to Humphrey.

'Good diving.'

Humphrey raised his can and figured it was time to stop chattering and ask questions. He took a sip and stared at the young man.

'Are you sure someone's not having a bit of a joke?'

'How do you mean, Humph?'

'Well. All this talk of Chinese secret societies and buried treasure. It reminds me of those adventure books I read when I was a boy.'

'Humph, the treasure is for real.' David looked surprised. 'My Uncle Charlie made a fortune out of it. He had a salvage boat. He brought up gold, diamonds that sort of thing from ships sunk during the Second World War.'

Humphrey questioned him about the ships and was impressed. David knew a great deal about the Pacific War. He'd evidently learnt it from the mysterious Sue Lynne and the equally mysterious Uncle Charlie.

He tried another approach, asking why Charlie hadn't hunted for Tong Yee's gold. Again, he got an immediate reply.

'Humph, Charlie thought in tens of millions of dollars. Tong Yee's gold might seem a lot to people like us but it was peanuts to Charlie.'

Humphrey ventured some questions about Sue Lynne and failed to gain any information. David became emotional and extremely reticent. There could be no doubt that the young man was under the mysterious lady's spell.

Chapter 8

Montague Island.

It was 8.30 am on a warm sunny morning. Two trailers with inflatable boats were standing on the golden sand and divers in wetsuits were milling around them. David was giving the boats a final inspection and Tim was checking the motors. Humphrey noted that Tim looked no worse for wear after his night of excitement with Janet.

He was uncertain what to do with his spectacles. He had a facemask with an optical prescription that worked well under water but was useless above. In theory he could wear his spectacles on the way out then put on his mask. But the ride would be a bit rough and the spectacles might be washed off. He decided to leave them in his bag. He walked back and found his mobile ringing.

'Is that you, Humph?'

He heard Rodney O'Neill's singsong voice.

'Who do you think it is?'

'You couldn't come round, could you?'

'Come round what?'

'You know what I mean ... don't muck around.'

'What do you want, Rodney? It's Australia Day. It's a public holiday. I'm at Narooma and I'm about to get into a Zodiac and go to Montague Island to dive amongst the seals.'

There was silence followed by clicks. Then Cecil Sparrow's dull monotone sounded in his ear.

'Dr Hansen.'

'Yes ... Chief Investigator.'

'Do I understand that you are on a diving excursion with the establishment owned and operated by Timothy John Price and David George Paget?'

'That is correct, Chief Investigator.'

'Are you aware of agent Pulnitz's presence?'

'I had noticed that Janet was here.'

'May I be assured that you have followed required agent-protection procedures?'

'You may, Chief Investigator.'

'I shall regard it as a severe breach of discipline if agent Pulnitz's identity is exposed or in any way compromised.'

The phone went dead. Humphrey switched it off and locked it in his bag. As far as he was concerned, it was his day off. Cecil and Rodney could phone as often as they liked. No one would answer.

* * * * *

They reached Montague Island after a bumpy ride over rough water. The rocky strip ran parallel to the coast and was home to a colony of seals. The din was deafening. Humphrey was reminded of visits to the zoo when he was a little boy. Dark shapes slid around and splashed into the water, honking furiously. He saw them indistinctly and struggled to put on his scuba tank.

David was in charge of one of the inflatable boats. Tim had the other. Humphrey was glad to be with David. The young man lacked Tim's experience but had a far

saner attitude towards life. Right now he was arguing with Tim about powerheads: an explosive device fitted to spear guns. Tim brandished his above his head.

‘If I meet a Great White, I want to take defensive action.’

David wasn’t impressed. ‘Your chance of being attacked by a shark is near zero. You’re far more likely to shoot it off by accident and kill someone.’

‘Mate. They’re only dangerous if you don’t know how to use ‘em.’

The exchange got nowhere. Tim moved his boat away and threw out an anchor. His team was soon in the water. David put down an anchor and a descent line and gave a pre-dive brief.

‘It’s a deep dive with a short bottom time,’ he cautioned. ‘Keep a good eye on your dive computer. Return to the surface slowly and do a decompression stop as an added precaution.’

He turned to Humphrey.

‘Okay, buddy. We’ll go down to the fifty-foot ledge and watch from there.’

He held out his arms.

‘Check me out.’

Humphrey ran his eye over David, starting at the feet and working up.

‘Your weight-belt is fastened on the wrong side.’

‘Good.’

David removed the belt and turned it round. Then he checked Humphrey.

‘Okay. All correct.’

Humphrey was impressed. David had made an intentional mistake. That was not the sort of behaviour he expected from someone of his age. He watched the other divers vanish down the descent line and sat on the side of the inflatable. David sat opposite. They exchanged signals and rolled backwards into the water. That was the easy part.

On his last trip, Humphrey had been marooned on the surface and had failed his test for that and other reasons. Getting down was not as simple as some might think. He’d had too little lead on his weight-belt. That is easy to understand in class but far from obvious when you are bobbing around in a choppy sea. This time he got it right.

He cleared water from his facemask, released air from his buoyancy vest and sank beneath the waves. David hovered beside him. They reached the fifty-foot ledge and Humphrey looked around. It was like another world.

The optical prescription of his mask was designed for underwater and his vision was no longer blurred. Giant kingfish swam around. There were starfish, yellow sponges and an octopus in a cave. A seal came down and was joined by another. Humphrey wished he had a camera. It was so exciting. His daughter, Elizabeth, would be fascinated.

The other members of the party had cameras. 90ft below, their lights were flashing. Humphrey saw them gathered about three dark shapes. At first he didn’t recognize them. Then one moved and he saw the unmistakable outline of a Port Jackson shark. The magnificent creatures were facing extinction, their numbers dwindling. Humphrey watched as time raced by. Suddenly, it was all over.

The other team members had to surface or risk the bends. David touched Humphrey’s arm. They exchanged signals and began a slow ascent, keeping

behind the bubbles that flowed from their mouthpieces. The sharks and kingfish were soon left far below but the action wasn't over.

A shoal of small fish was darting back and forth near the surface and there were tuna amongst them. Humphrey squeezed air into his buoyancy vest and raised an arm in the way that he'd been taught. Suddenly, he realized why you surfaced like that.

Better to lose an arm than a head.

A dark shape had turned the sea to foam. Humphrey clawed at his buoyancy vest in a frantic attempt to descend, hit the wrong button and rocketed up.

There was pandemonium when he reached the surface. Tim's divers were bobbing about in a tangle of fishing lines and Tim was back in his boat with Janet. A catamaran had stopped a short way off and a man was trying to reel in a fish. Tim waved his speargun at him.

'You bastard!'

The man ignored him.

'This is a dive site. We've got flags up.'

'So what?'

'You shouldn't be here ... that's what.'

'Grow up!'

The fishing line swept through the water and became entangled with Tim's boat. He cut the line with his dive knife and the man looked mortified.

'You fucking bastard!'

Shocked faces appeared on the catamaran: neatly dressed people who seemed overwhelmed by what was happening about them.

'Get his rego number,' Janet yelled.

'Fuck off!'

The catamaran revved its engines and became entangled in Tim's anchor line. The inflatable lurched round, throwing expensive equipment into the water.

'Stop ... or I'll shoot.'

More equipment was lost overboard.

'Sod you!'

The spear left Tim's gun and the powerhead blasted a neat hole in one of the catamaran's twin hulls. The damage wasn't great but the effect was immediate. The cat stopped and Janet sprang onto its deck.

'Do as you're told.'

She grabbed one of the crew.

'Stay where you are.'

She dragged the man off his feet and glared at the other occupants of the boat.

'Don't move or I'll break his arm.'

In the water, beside Humphrey, a grey-haired man watched the confrontation with a mixture of disbelief and alarm.

* * * * *

Two hours later he was still beating Humphrey's ear on the subject. They had stopped at a pub on their way back to Canberra and the man was totally obsessed by the incident.

'That woman is whoopee. She's out of her mind.'

Humphrey listened to an outpouring of legal discourse. The two were older than the other members of their group. The man evidently felt a need to empty his mind to someone of his own generation.

'Tim's mad but that woman makes him seem almost normal. She's totally off her head. If this comes to court, we'll be severely compromised.'

'I didn't see what happened,' Humphrey said. 'I wasn't wearing my spectacles. My mask is corrected for underwater vision.'

'I'm a solicitor,' the other said.

'Yes,' Humphrey yawned.

'I have a reputation to protect.'

Humphrey took a swig of beer and tried to look sympathetic.

'The truth is ... it's a matter for the police.'

Humphrey wondered if the man knew that Janet was, technically speaking, a police officer. He considered his next remark before replying. 'I understand the catamaran was in breach of the law and creating a dangerous situation.'

'The operators of that boat may indeed have been in breach of the law. The paying passengers were not. There are people I know amongst them. Their safety was threatened by the indefensible behaviour of Tim and that crazy woman. I am deeply embarrassed.'

Humphrey wondered why he should feel embarrassed but didn't pursue the point. He found the legal profession tiresome. The man's company was painful. He excused himself and wandered off to the toilet. Having relieved himself, he drifted towards a table where some girls were sitting.

'How ya going, Humptie?'

He didn't like the appellation but preferred the company.

'I'm still trying to find my sea legs.'

They laughed.

'How's your eyesight?'

'Much better. Thank you.'

They made a place for him and he sat down

'Did you see the sharks?'

Humphrey started to reply but was interrupted by Tim's raucous voice. He sounded drunk. David was trying to quieten him.

'Colonel Bigus Dickus.'

Tim held up a photograph and handed it to the girl beside him.

'Sergeant Pennyfather.'

He handed out another. David tried to stop him but without success. Captain Slim, Major Boomerang, The Rabbi and The Bishop followed in rapid succession. The first reached their table and the girls passed it around.

'Do you think Humphrey's old enough?'

They formed into a conclave and decided he was.

'There you are, Humph. Could you equal that?'

The photograph was one he recognized from work. He guessed it had been packed back into a parcel and left for David and Tim to pick up. That was how Cecil Sparrow's people got onto them. Humphrey stared at the colonel's impressive male offering and pursed his lips.

'What's the matter, Humph?'

The girls gathered around and giggled.

'Don't you think you could come up with it?'

Humphrey adjusted his spectacles.

'The colonel and I have something in common.'

The girls burst out laughing and Humphrey managed to slip the colonel up his sleeve while their attention was occupied by The Rabbi and The Bishop. A short time later, Captain Slim went the same way. He wondered what the reaction would be when it was noticed that they were missing.

'Okay! Where are they?'

Tim stood on a bench and held up one of the photographs. He'd spilt beer on his T-shirt and was far from sober.

'I've got The Rabbi. Where's the rest?'

Someone produced The Major but the others were missing.

Humphrey was reminded of the card game Happy Families which his daughter, Elizabeth, liked to play. Tim had The Rabbi and The Major. He had the colonel and the captain. That left The Bishop and The Sergeant. There could be little doubt who had the last two cards.

* * * * *

Janet adjusted the earpiece of her CD player. She was following along behind the Landcruiser driven by David and carrying Humphrey and a drunken Tim. Like David, she had confined her drinking to orange juice.

The CD player had been modified to act as a radio and was standard issue together with a service pistol, handcuffs and other trappings of a drug enforcement officer. Another piece of equipment was in her dive bag on the seat beside Humphrey. It contained a small microphone and was transmitting conversations in the Landcruiser. She turned a switch and activated a recording mechanism.

Chapter 9

Problems.

David sat in a corner of the dive shop, sorting through a new consignment of scuba equipment, sticking on labels and assigning codes. He was aware that he was making mistakes. There were too many things on his mind. Problems were nothing new but these were coming in like they'd never stop and they weren't ordinary problems ... they were serious.

It was only two weeks since his return to Australia and far too much had happened in that short space of time. He had hit Harald. There was the serious incident off Montague Island and there were the parcels. He couldn't get the parcels out of his mind. He had posted five and only one had turned up. But it wasn't like any he had packed. It was like they'd all been opened and the contents muddled up.

Tim was out in the yard filling scuba tanks. It was early afternoon and they'd not had a single customer all day. Then a car arrived and two men with short hair got out. They looked like they were in the army. David liked army guys. They had lots of money to spend on things like diving. The men entered the shop.

'Is Tim Price around?'

David went to the rear and shouted for Tim. When he got back the men were still standing at the counter. It struck him as odd. Usually, when you left customers, they wandered around looking at things.

Tim arrived with oil on his hands.

One of the men produced a badge.

'Are you Timothy John Price?'

'Yeah, mate.'

'Mr Price. Complaints have been received concerning a maritime incident in the proximity of Montague Island, on the south coast ...'

David listened. He'd spoken to Tim about his concerns and Tim had told him not to worry.

'Relax, mate. It might never happen.'

Now it had. The men weren't army. They were plain-clothes police.

'Mr Price. There are points we need clarifying.'

The policeman was trying to adopt a relaxed pose ... make it seem it wasn't important. David wasn't convinced. If it wasn't important, why hadn't they phoned and told Tim to go round to the police station?

* * * * *

Tim pulled on a shirt and left with the two men. David shut the shop and retreated into the workroom. He'd had enough hassles for one day and needed to relax. He took a scuba regulator from the shelf and started to service it. Five minutes later, the phone rang. He placed the regulator on his workbench and went to answer it.

'Adventure Dive Centre. Dave speaking.'

'Am I speaking with David George Paget?'

'Yes.'

'Mr Paget. I am Marcus Hynem of Brice, Johnston and Hynem.'

The man had a self-satisfied voice that infuriated David.

'Mr Paget. I'm acting on behalf of your cousin, Mr Harald Paget. I'm phoning from his bedside in the spinal injuries unit of the Mintano Clinic.'

David's heart missed a beat.

'Mr Paget. You will be aware that your cousin received serious injuries following an attack, which you made upon him during the course of a gathering to mark the birthday of your grandfather, Sir George Paget.'

David had a mental image of a man in a grey suit, sitting beside Harald in an expensive private hospital. He guessed he would be a lawyer or someone important like that.

'Mr Paget. Are you still there?'

David's mind went blank.

'Would you please repeat that?'

The man started to speak but was soon interrupted.

‘David.’

He heard Harald’s voice.

‘Get off your fucking arse and pay attention to what’s going on. You’re not in bloody Toy Town now. You need to grow up or you’ll find out what happens to silly little buggers like you.’

David didn’t feel nervous anymore. His cousin didn’t frighten him. Harald might think himself important but David didn’t see it that way.

‘I can bring charges against you for criminal assault,’ Harald screamed down the phone. ‘I can have you sent to jail.’

David remained silent.

‘Listen, you stupid little bastard! I’m prepared to be generous. If you sign a statement saying you’ve had sexual relations with my wife, I’ll drop all charges against you.’

David felt a surge of adrenalin.

‘You’re sick, Harald. You’re a bloody pervert. That’s what you are. That’s why Sue Lynne left you.’

There was heavy breathing and another voice spoke, trying to calm Harald but without success.

‘I’ll ask you just one more time,’ Harald screamed. ‘Will you sign?’

‘No, Harald.’

‘You’ll regret this. You stupid little bastard. You might think you’re in with that bitch but you’re not. You’re a nobody. If you can’t understand that, you’re dead.’

Harald slammed down the phone and David returned his attention to the regulator. He picked it up and put it back down. He needed someone to talk to. Above all, he needed to speak to Sue Lynne. He had tried many times since returning from Hong Kong but always got her answering machine. This time he heard her voice and it didn’t sound recorded. He knocked the regulator off the bench in his excitement.

‘Sue Lynne, it’s me.’

There was a brief pause.

‘David, I’m so relieved.’

‘I’ve been trying to phone you, Sue Lynne.’

‘I got your message, David. You said Doris gave you the suitcase. What did you do with it?’

‘I had a bit of trouble, Sue Lynne.’

‘What?’

‘There were drugs in it.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I got zonked out on them.’

He told her about the powder and she sounded alarmed.

‘Oh. My God. I had no idea ... I can’t imagine what it was doing there.’

‘I was real ill, Sue Lynne. I still can’t remember what happened. Even when I got back I still felt crook. I probably wouldn’t have hit Harald if it hadn’t have been for that.’

He told her about the birthday party, the fight on the stairs and Harald’s threat to lay charges against him.

‘He wants me to sign a paper to say we had sex together.’

'David. You mustn't.' There was a touch of hysteria in her voice. 'He wants to show I'm not a fit person to have custody of Anne.'

'No one would believe that, Sue Lynne.'

'A court of law might, David. Harald has money to hire top barristers.'

He heard her sobbing.

'Don't worry. I won't sign anything for Harald. I've told him that.'

She regained her composure and started to talk about the contents of the suitcase.

'What did you do with them?'

'I posted them back. I didn't want to take them with me. I was really confused but I must have been thinking straight part of the time.'

'Have they arrived?'

David said one of the parcels had arrived. He told her about Tim's old rooming house and how they'd picked it up from there. And he told her about the contents, including the photographs of men and naked girls, one of whom he'd identified as Doris.

'How many of these photographs have you got?'

'Two, Sue Lynne.'

The phone went dead for a while then he heard her again. 'Listen, David. I want you to send them to me.' She gave instructions on how he was to post the photographs in well-sealed plastic bags, folded between sheets of paper and placed in plain envelopes.

'What about the other photographs? There are pictures of people being married. I think one is Mr Lee.'

'David. One thing at a time. Let's see if you can get those two photographs to me. I'll tell you what to do with the others later.'

David unplugged the telephone and put it in a drawer. He didn't bother to pick up the pieces of the regulator. There was no point. His nerves were too much on edge. There was no way he could complete the delicate job of reassembling them. His world was falling apart. Harald was going to lay charges. Their boating licenses would almost certainly be cancelled. They wouldn't be able to run the business and they would not be able to go after Tong Yee's gold.

He wondered what Charlie would have done in the circumstances. Charlie had problems but he never let them stand in his way. He remembered a conversation he'd once had with his uncle. He was about fourteen at the time and Charlie was staying at his parents' house in New York. David was in conflict with his school principal. His father was sympathetic but insisted that David bow to the man's authority no matter how stupid he was. Charlie was of a different opinion. One day, when they were alone, he reflected on the problems posed by authority.

'What do you do when you can't beat them?'

'Join them,' David replied without thinking.

'Do you really want to become one of them?'

'No.' David shook his head.

'They set the rules. So what do you do?'

'Dunno.'

'You move the goalposts, David.'

There was a message in what Charlie said all those years ago and the more David thought about it, the more it took form. After a while he was able to put it into words Charlie might have used.

Don't hang around and wait for the bastards to lay charges. Go out there and look for Tong Yee's gold before they can do anything to stop you.

David felt more relaxed. A plan was developing. The next step was to get parts of Tong Yee's journal translated. They had been invited to the Hansens for dinner that evening. He resolved to stay until Humphrey had deciphered the last of the clues needed to find the gold.

* * * * *

Kirstin Hansen looked out of the window as Humphrey drove into the yard with her sixteen-year-old granddaughter, Elizabeth. Recently retired from a lifetime in intelligence activities, Kirstin had been born in Shanghai of Danish missionary parents. When the Communists gained power in China the family stayed on for a few years then gave up the unequal struggle and returned to Denmark. Kirstin was eighteen at the time and ill-prepared for the vibrant nightlife of Copenhagen.

She left for Australia three years later, a single mother with a small son. Contrary to the dire predictions of her father, she did not end up on the streets but secured a position with the Australian Department of External Affairs where her knowledge of Chinese was highly valued.

Before long she was recruited into a counterespionage unit. Now, more than three decades later, she still retained much of the impish vitality of the wild young person she had once been. Time had done little to change Kirstin but the burden of bringing up Humphrey had taken a heavy toll. He reminded her of her father. The ponderous Pastor Hansen had passed on far too many traits. She wondered why her son had not taken after the virile young man who seduced her on the back seat of his Saab all those many years ago.

She was awaiting the arrival of David Paget. Kirstin knew the family well. Canberra is a small place for those who have lived there a long time. They move in the same circles and get to know similar people, which was all rather incestuous in Kirstin's opinion.

From time to time she met David's mother. According to Cecilia, her "darling boy" was the splitting image of his Uncle Charles. As a young woman, Kirstin had known Charlie Paget rather well. He was the son of her boss, George Paget, and was the black sheep of the family. Charlie had all the qualities needed to succeed in Canberra: family connections, intelligence, education, charm, commanding manner and appearance. But Charlie hated Canberra.

A Landcruiser entered the driveway and stopped beside Humphrey's old car. At first, Kirstin was disappointed. The young man who emerged bore little resemblance to Charlie. Then the other door opened and she felt herself drifting back in time.

David was not as old as the Charlie she had known but, otherwise, the resemblance was astounding. He had a bottle of wine in one hand and a large book in the other. Kirstin guessed the book was Tong Yee's journal.

They introduced themselves and followed her into the house. Tim went off to join Humphrey in the kitchen and David accompanied her into the living room. He handed her the journal and she sat down to examine it.

At some time in the past, a collection of documents had been bound together to form a single volume. Kirstin flipped through the pages and was intrigued. Tong Yee came to Australia in the 1890s at the age of nineteen. Years passed. He changed his name to Tom Lee and died in the 1950s, a rich and respected citizen of his adopted country.

The earlier pages were written in pre-revolutionary Chinese characters and gave a vivid account of life on the Palmer River goldfields in Far North Queensland. According to Tong Yee there were more Chinese on the Palmer than any other nationality and there was a Chinese consulate in Cooktown to cater for their needs.

In those days, Queensland was a British colony and the authorities issued licenses and extracted royalties from the miners. The royalties caused deep resentment and there were numerous attempts to smuggle gold. The journal described how the Chinese hid theirs amongst the remains of their dead and shipped them back to China for burial. Kirstin was engrossed in a passage about hollow bones, filled with gold dust, when her granddaughter came into the room.

Elizabeth had changed out of her school clothes and was wearing a stylish pair of denims with matching top. Humphrey had given a glowing account of David and Elizabeth was keen to meet him. She watched them together. Her granddaughter was growing up fast. Although four years younger than David she was behaving towards him as a mature young lady, without any shyness or silliness. Kirstin wished Elizabeth's mother could see her now. But that could not be. The poor woman had died of leukaemia when Elizabeth was a baby. Humphrey had been shattered by her death.

Tim announced that dinner was served. He wore a striped shirt and black trousers and had come equipped with a chef's hat. Kirstin watched his antics with a mixture of interest and amusement. He was older than David and clearly came from a very different family background. But what Tim lacked in social graces he made up for with a quick wit and engaging personality. He evidently shared Humphrey's passion for spicy food. The two of them had cooked up some marvellous looking dishes.

Kirstin went to the table and sat down beside David. His close presence rekindled old passions. The young man not only looked like his uncle, he smelt like him. Charles Paget had been her lover. There was no chance of marriage but that hadn't worried Kirstin. Charlie wasn't the marrying kind. Humphrey would never understand that. Like her missionary father, Humphrey was blind to passion. She sometimes wondered how he had found such a lovely wife and fathered a daughter by her.

A tom yum soup was followed by red chicken curry cooked in coconut milk and accompanied by boiled rice and side dishes. The last course was served and the plates taken away. Elizabeth helped David with the washing up and Tim helped Humphrey sample his extensive collection of malt whiskies.

Kirstin returned to the journal and found a passage in which Tong Yee described a fight with a rival group of Chinese. They put into port and immediately

attacked his people with guns and swords. Tong Yee knew he couldn't rely on the forces of law and order. Those who hadn't locked themselves in the police station were out in the streets with the white miners cheering the two sides on, urging them to kill one another.

Facing defeat, Tong Yee took the gold that had been placed in his care and hid it in an underwater cave on the Great Barrier Reef. The journal gave a detailed description of where the gold could be found. Charlie evidently thought it was still there. It was exciting to think that David and Tim would go out and find it. She guessed they needed some translating and was sure she could provide the relevant information.

* * * * *

Humphrey arrived at work the following day and was met in the foyer by a uniformed security officer who asked him to open his briefcase. It was the sort of routine search that happened from time to time. The officer was in his early twenties, extremely polite and not very bright. Humphrey wondered if he'd been handpicked for the job by Cecil Sparrow.

'What is this, Sir?'

The young man held up some papers covered in Chinese writing.

'They're something I took home to work on. My mother was born in China. She is acquainted with the old writing system.'

'They're marked confidential, Sir.'

'Oh. That's a very low classification.' Humphrey showed some irritation. 'No one gets fussed if you take that sort of thing home.'

'It's in breach of regulations, Sir. I'll have to place them in security.'

'Hughh.'

'What else is in the case, Sir?'

'Only my sandwiches and some diving photographs. Do you want to place them in security too?'

'That will not be necessary, Sir.'

Humphrey snapped the briefcase shut and hurried off. He was writing an article on cyber warfare and he was keen to finish it. He entered his office and was about to start work when he saw a sheet of paper in his in tray.

It was typed in the font used by Cecil Sparrow's secretary, Mrs Cohen, and carried a stern warning that the use of green ink was reserved for annotations made by the Chief Investigator.

Humphrey took a green pen and wrote BALLS across the offending item before assigning it to the bin. A moment later his telephone rang and he heard Mrs Cohen's voice. 'Dr Hansen. You are wanted in the interview room.'

'What language?'

'You are not needed to translate. They want to interview you personally.'

Humphrey glanced at the wastepaper bin.

'You mean, I'm going to be disciplined for using green ink?'

'No.' She sounded embarrassed. 'Please go and wait outside.'

The line of plastic chairs was familiar and so was the voice coming from the interview room. Humphrey sat down and strained his ears. The voice belonged to

Janet Pulnitz but what she was saying was by no means clear. He moved closer then winced as the output of Janet's powerful lungs increased by several decibels.

'You can all get stuffed!'

The door flew open and Janet stormed out. Humphrey eased himself from his chair and went inside. The room was bleak. Infinite care had been taken to conform with every human rights charter ever entered into by an Australian government. There were video cameras to record proceedings. A glass of water was available in case the interviewees needed to quench their thirst. There was a telephone in case they needed to make a call; and a man from the Attorney General's Department was there to ensure that everything was done according to the rules.

'Dr Hansen.'

Cecil Sparrow peered at him over his spectacles, double chins merging with his oversized neck. He sat at the far end of the interview table, flanked by two officials. Humphrey recognized both of them.

'Dr Hansen.'

'Yes.'

'A serious situation has arisen ...'

Cecil gave an account of the diving trip to Narooma. He wanted to know why Humphrey had failed to report on it.

'I was instructed to remain invisible. I was told that agent Pulnitz was assigned and I was to do nothing to expose her cover.'

'Standing orders require you to report any irregular conduct observed in your colleagues.'

'Yes.' Humphrey stared Cecil in the face.

'You failed to report the liaison between agent Pulnitz and suspect Timothy John Price.'

'I didn't know he was a suspect. I hadn't been briefed.'

'You had ample opportunity ...'

Humphrey decided to dig in his heels. He detected a sympathetic look from the man from the Attorney General's Department and guessed he had an ally. Cecil asked about the confrontation with the catamaran. Humphrey claimed vision problems had prevented him from seeing what happened. Then, there was the incident with the pornographic prints.

'Dr Hansen. You must have recognized them.'

'I did.'

'So. Why didn't you report?'

'I was not the action officer. Agent Pulnitz occupied that role.' He turned to the man from the Attorney General's Department. 'I often see plain clothes agents in the street. I ignore them. Standing orders require me to do so.'

Cecil tried a different approach.

'Suspects Price and Paget were observed to spend over four hours at your residence yesterday.'

'I didn't know they were suspects. I've already made it clear, in answer to a previous question, that I was not briefed on this case.'

Again, he addressed his remarks to the man from the Attorney General's Department, who was making copious notes. He knew he had scored some points but was acutely aware that he was vulnerable.

Cecil looked up.

'Dr Hansen. Why would a man of your age wish to invite young men, like Price and Paget, to your house?'

Humphrey did his best to look perplexed.

'Why not?'

'You can't have much in common with them.'

'I go diving with them.'

'Is that all?'

'My mother once worked for Sir George Paget. She was one of his top intelligence agents. David is Sir George's grandson.'

Cecil said he didn't know anything about George Paget and would have said more if he'd not been interrupted by the man from the Attorney General's Department who told him Sir George had been one of Australia's foremost spy catchers.

For a moment Cecil was subdued. Humphrey knew it wouldn't last. He sat back and waited for the inevitable.

'Dr Hansen. We shall need to conduct a search of your residence.'

The thought was chilling. Over the years, he had copied sensitive documents as source material for the many articles he had been commissioned to write. A search would turn up material with the highest security classification. Cecil interrupted his thoughts.

'We can, of course, obtain a search warrant. Alternatively, you may decide it is in your interests to give permission for such an inspection to take place.'

There was no point in objecting. Humphrey said he would agree but needed to phone his mother at the university library so she could pick up his daughter from school and take her to ballet class. Cecil tried to object but the man from the Attorney General's Department overruled him.

Chapter 10

Hot and Humid.

It took a while for David and Tim to get their act together. Their first problem was to find a relief manager for the Dive Centre. Three days of fruitless searching went by and they were wondering what to do when help came from an unexpected quarter. Janet arrived saying she'd been sacked and was looking for a job.

Another surprise came when David went round to the Hansens to collect the translation of Tong Yee's journal. Kirstin was there to meet him. She said Humph and Jan worked for the same government agency and they'd both lost their jobs.

Kirstin wouldn't go into details but said it was lucky she had taken the journal to her office in the university library. As far as David could make out, the Hansen

house had been searched and a lot of papers taken. By good chance, the journal was not amongst them.

Janet was now in charge of the Dive Centre. David regarded her as mad but that was no reason for rejecting her services. They needed someone to run the place while they were away hunting for the gold. Tim was sleeping with her and David occupied a lonely bed in the room next door. Their lovemaking sounded wilder than anything he had experienced with Sue Lynne. On some occasions he wondered if he was missing out. On others he wondered what it was all about.

After a week they were ready to leave. Janet went through a checklist of all that was needed to reach Cooktown and mount an expedition out to sea. She did it with her usual overkill, making a big performance out of everything. Apart from that, David couldn't fault her.

It was his first big trip in Australia. Up to now his only experience of long-distance driving was when his father took him on a tour during the school holidays. His mother didn't like to travel and it had been just the two of them. They left New York and drove down the coast to Jacksonville before heading across to New Orleans. David was fifteen at the time and thought in miles. Now he measured distances in kilometres. It made no difference. New Orleans was a hell of a long way from New York: 1500 miles or 2500 kilometres: the same as Canberra to Townsville. It would be their first stop. After that they had another 400 miles to go before reaching Cooktown.

Canberra is in high country and in temperate latitudes. Even in summer the weather can be cold. David wore a thick jacket when they left. By the time they reached the coast near Coffs Harbour he'd taken it off and turned on the air conditioning. It was like entering a different world. He saw banana plantations and there were fields of sugarcane beside the road.

There wasn't time to take in the sights. They kept going, stopping only for petrol and to change drivers. Night fell just north of Brisbane. Tim had planned it like that. He said the hardest part would be up through Queensland. In the daytime the vehicle would overheat and give trouble if they didn't stop and let it cool down.

Stopping was not on the agenda. They were determined to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Canberra in the shortest possible time.

One drove while the other slept. Rockhampton, on the Tropic of Capricorn, was reached during the middle of the night. Shortly after daybreak they arrived at the coastal town of Mackay and stopped for petrol.

Tim let more air out of the tires. He'd been checking their pressure throughout the journey saying they could overheat. If that happened, the rubber would get soft and the pressure would go up ... a dangerous combination that could lead to multiple blowouts.

* * * * *

Five hours later they were in Townsville. They booked into a backpacker hostel and spent the afternoon checking equipment. Tim gave the Landcruiser a thorough going over and spent time working on the trailer's suspension. David sorted through the dive gear then sat beside the swimming pool reading Kirstin's translation of the journal.

The heat was oppressive. Ninety degrees in the shade and humid. Tim said he and his mates fried eggs on the tops of their tanks when they were based in the city.

David found that fully believable. The ground was too hot for bare feet and they'd had to hose down the Landcruiser before Tim could work on it.

Tim completed his work and they returned to their room. They had booked into the more up-market part of the hostel and had their own en suite and air conditioning. David changed into shorts and T-shirt. Tim donned long trousers and an open-necked shirt.

David was struck by how much his friend had slowed down. In Canberra Tim was forever dashing about madly. Here he was taking everything slowly. It didn't take long to understand why. In a cold climate you have to expend energy to stay warm. In a hot climate the opposite is true. If you dash around you heat up and that's bad news.

The sun went down, the temperature dropped and they went out to sample the nightlife. Tim was keen to show David his old haunts. Their first stop was a nightclub where a difference of opinion had ended Tim's military career. The once famous venue dated from the 1890s and was a marvellous example of the architecture of those days.

Wooden pillars supported a cast-iron balcony. David was reminded of the old photographs in the suitcase: women in long dresses and children in sailor suits. He stopped for a while to admire the ornate ironwork then followed Tim inside.

They ordered a couple of beers and Tim yarned with the barman about brawls with the nightclub's bouncers. If Tim was to be believed, highly trained soldiers fought against amateurs. After a near riot the brigadier declared the venue out of bounds to the troops and the nightclub went bust for lack of patronage. Tim found the whole thing amusing. David didn't share his mirth. The owners had put in a lot of effort to make the place work and they'd spent a heap of money only to see the whole thing wrecked by a bunch of hooligans. He lost interest in the conversation and his attention strayed.

Two men had arrived and were waiting to order drinks. There was something familiar about them. David felt certain he'd seen them before but couldn't remember where. They had the well-scrubbed look of office workers and were dressed in badly fitting leisure gear. One wore a baseball cap and the other had a towelling floppy hat.

Then he remembered. It was in Rockhampton the night before. They'd stopped at a railway crossing. The gate was down and he was sitting at the wheel, waiting for the train to come, when a vehicle screeched to a halt behind him. He saw it in his rear mirror. Despite the late hour, the driver wore a baseball cap and the man beside him wore a floppy hat. He'd not taken much notice of them but he'd remembered the headgear. The pair averted their eyes when they saw him looking at them and David felt uneasy.

* * * * *

On the following day they continued northwards at a more leisurely pace. David started to relax. The growing distance from Canberra had a therapeutic effect. The further he got from the source of their problems the faster his worries slipped

away. He was almost in a holiday mood when they came upon a bush track near the resort town of Port Douglas. It led to the beach and they went down it.

Tim was soon displaying the driving skills he had learnt in the army. The track ran over sand and he coaxed the vehicle along, getting up momentum on the firmer sections and coasting over the soft parts. They slithered from side to side but kept going. Glancing in the rear mirror, David noticed a vehicle behind them. It was a Landcruiser like their own but without a trailer. The driver lacked Tim's skills and was soon bogged down.

David grabbed a pair of binoculars.

'I think we're being followed.'

'Stop worrying.'

'No. I've seen them before.'

'Jesus. Don't you ever relax?'

'Tim, I've seen 'em three times now. One wears a floppy hat and the other's got a baseball cap. I think we should find out who they are. Like go back and offer to pull 'em out ... get a good look at them.'

'Mate. If we stop now, we'll be grounded like they are.' Tim changed gear. 'It's getting late. I want to get in a bit of fossicking while it's still light enough to see what's going on.'

They continued for a while then a gap appeared in the bushes. Tim swung the wheel, squeezed between two coconut palms and came to a halt on a long stretch of beach. He jumped down and threw out his arms.

'We've arrived in paradise.'

David couldn't agree more. It was a beautiful setting. Blue sea, pearly white sand, palm trees and tropical bushes with huge leaves and brightly coloured flowers. Tim grabbed a bag.

'You set up camp, Davo. I'm going off to see what I can find. I'll do the cooking when I get back.'

He ran off and David started to unpack. He knew his friend would be looking for sandblasted tree stumps, sun-bleached fishing net, cork, seashells and anything else that could be worked into an artistic creation. He finished unpacking and took a beer from the icebox.

The scene was peaceful. The birds were going to roost and creatures of the night had started to appear. He pulled the cap off the beer and took a sip. The urge to relax was tempting but he couldn't rid himself of the feeling that they were being followed. It was a disturbing thought. He finished the beer and reached for another. It tasted better and the third was better still.

The blood-red disk of the sun slipped towards the horizon. In Canberra sunset came slowly. Here, in the tropics, it was over in a flash ... and the lighting was different.

David was reminded of a picture Tim had painted in his army days when he was stationed in the north. It was a beach scene, not much different from the present. Crimson sky, blue-grey mountains and an azure sea cut by a brilliant band of yellow sand. He used to think the colours exaggerated. Now he knew they were true to life. For a brief moment, when the sun went down, that was what you saw.

He watched his friend come back along the beach. The light was more subdued now. The sharp contrasts of a minute ago had been replaced by subtle hues. Pink

had changed to violet, once-sharp edges were blurred and Tim was little more than a dark shape in the twilight. He arrived with a collection of marine junk and dumped it down beside the Landcruiser. David hoped he'd sort through it and not try to take the whole lot back to Canberra.

They had bought a pair of bream from some Aboriginal lads who were fishing on a bridge near Cairns. Tim had negotiated a price that seemed more than generous to David but he was not surprised. Tim enjoyed a chat and had a casual attitude towards money.

The fish were rubbed with spices and wrapped in foil. Tim had spent part of his army days in Malaysia and claimed to be an expert on Malaysian women and Malaysian cooking. David had no way of judging the first but could vouch for the second. Tim produced a cask of red wine and was determined to consume all of it that evening. David declined the invitation to help him.

They finished the meal and David started to clean the dishes. Tim began to sing.

'She was the rabbi's daughter ...'

'Shh.' David grabbed his arm.

'What's the matter? Don't you enjoy a song?'

'I can hear something.'

'Where?'

'Back there in the bushes.'

Tim took another swig. 'Just a wild pig.'

'It doesn't sound like one to me.'

'Relax.' Tim held out the cask. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

David pushed the cask away. It wasn't a pig. Pigs have few inhibitions about noise and the same couldn't be said for the creature in the bushes. It was trying to be as quiet as possible and wasn't very good at it.

He got up and wandered away from the fire. Two problems pressed heavily on him. One was the need to pee and the other was the need to know. He went to the Landcruiser and took a night-vision scope from his dive box. It had been purchased as an aid to divemasters supervising night dives. Tim said it was a waste of money. David was pleased to have it now.

He walked down to the high tide mark. There was no moon and the sky was overcast. His eyes adjusted to the dark. All he could see was the glow of fireflies and the phosphorescent shimmer of waves breaking on the shore. The scope worked with infrared light and was good at separating humans from their surroundings. In the cool waters of the south, divers stood out at night and a divemaster could see them once they'd surfaced. David turned on the scope and put it to his eye. He usually had to adjust for brightness but there was no need.

A beam of light was dancing over the sand towards him. Whoever was stalking them had an infrared torch. David thought that a bit crude. If he were spying, it would be the last thing he'd use. He faced out to sea, pulled at his zip and returned the scope to his eye. The sea shimmered green and a giant shadow stretched out before him, legs apart and peeing.

The beam was pointing directly at him. It was like someone had him in their sights and was preparing to blast him away. That was what happened to his father. He was got by an insurgent's bullet when he was on patrol in one of the Gulf States. David tensed and was relieved when the beam moved away. He turned

his head and saw it settle on Tim, who was stretched out against a palm tree with a wine cask balanced on his chest.

He zipped up his fly and sprinted to the band of vegetation that ran along the top of the beach. Palm fronds crackled underfoot when he got there. He crouched and put the scope to his eye. The stalker had left the cover of the bushes and was examining the Landcruiser.

Illuminated by his own torch the man was clearly visible: overweight and wearing a baseball cap. He crept round to the trailer and lifted the tarpaulin. Then, apparently satisfied, he left the vehicle and walked back onto the track.

* * * * *

David drove the next day. Tim was in no fit state to take the wheel and lay on the back seat with a wet towel over his face. He blamed David for not helping him demolish the wine cask saying it was the last pint that had done the damage. It was a weak joke and a poor excuse. David was not impressed. He'd spent a restless night worrying about their pursuers and how to shake them off.

They were towing a trailer with an inflatable boat and scuba gear. Even idiots like Baseball Cap and Floppy Hat would figure they were planning to go diving. All they had to do was follow along behind and not crash into them as they'd almost done at the rail crossing. The pair were incompetent. Their clothes didn't fit and their surveillance methods were rat shit. They couldn't even handle the expensive vehicle they were driving. It wouldn't be difficult to give them the slip. All that was needed was a change of routine.

The coastal road led to Cape Tribulation. It was a famous tourist destination and home to the Daintree Forest, an area of pristine beauty that had been saved from logging by the concerted effort of environmental activists. It was now a declared World Heritage area. David was keen to see it but they weren't going there. They were going to Cooktown and they were taking an inland road. He glanced in his rear mirror. The Landcruiser was following at a distance of about five hundred yards. The turn-off to Cooktown was a mile away and there was a forestry track a further five miles from that, just beyond the town of Mossman. He passed the turn-off, checked that the Landcruiser had a clear view of him and accelerated away.

The Landcruiser vanished from his rear-view mirror and there was still no sign of it when he reached the forestry track and disappeared down it. The track linked up with the Cooktown road. He pictured Baseball Cap and Floppy Hat continuing on to Cape Tribulation and searching in vain amongst the campsites and backpacker hostels that dotted the huge area.

Chapter 11

Footsie.

They reached Cooktown in the late afternoon after a rough ride over dirt roads. David was keen to find a camp ground. Tim wanted to show him the town. He had sobered up and was talking enthusiastically about the photographs in Tong Yee's journal, saying there had once been some fantastic buildings in the town. David couldn't see any. There were vacant lots where buildings had once stood and there were modern buildings but there was very little that looked like it went back to the 1890s.

'What do you think happened to them?'

'Happened to what, mate?'

'The old buildings.'

'Got blown away.' Tim waved his arms. 'A lot of tropical cyclones came through at the turn of the century and did a heap of damage. And there were some bad fires too. When the gold ran out there wasn't the money to repair them ... but some of the best survived.'

He pointed to an old pub.

'There's one. Pull over so we can get a look.'

David kept going.

'Stop.' Tim grabbed the wheel. 'You gotta see it.'

'I think we should find a campsite first.'

'There's time for that later.'

'You shouldn't drink anymore, Tim.'

'Mate. You're beginning to sound like your old lady.'

It was a reference to David's mother and struck a raw nerve. Against his better judgment, David stopped and gazed through a tropical heat haze while Tim delivered a discourse on his army adventures in the Far North.

'We'd been bush for over two weeks. We were with this major who was a bloody fanatic about survival skills. He didn't even let us have matches. We had to use the lenses on our scopes to light fires. And we didn't have rations. They'd sent us out without any tucker. We had to find it for ourselves. We had these cards. They were like playing cards. They had a picture of a plant on one side and on the back you were told about its nutritional properties and how to prepare it ...'

David had heard the story many times. Usually it involved a chance encounter with a group of Swedish girls with backpacks or something equally unbelievable. On this occasion the ending was different.

'We got back to Cooktown. We'd only had possum piss and dew to drink for two days. Then, we found this pub.'

'What pub?'

'This one, of course.'

Tim threw open the door and leapt out. David checked that everything was secure and followed him into the bar. It was like stepping back into the pioneering days.

'Don't you think it's great?'

'Yeah.' David had to agree.

'Take a look at that.' Tim pointed to a frieze of paintings that ran round the walls. It depicted a line of revellers in party dress. Men in dinner jackets and girls with the distinctive hairstyles of the 1920s. Legs flying, arms waving, short skirts flapping, they looked as if they were having a great time.

The elderly barman saw Tim's enthusiasm.

'That was painted when I was a nipper.'

Tim rocked back on his barstool and contemplated the painting.

'The fella who done that was a real professional.'

'My oath. He was.' the old man replied. 'I remember him. He worked amazing quick once he got going.'

'Yeah,' Tim nodded. 'His lines have got a great flow to them.'

'Every one of those people up there is real,' the barman said. 'He painted the leading personalities in the town.'

'You mean the important people?'

'No. I mean the people who mattered. The people who gave the place a bit of life.' His face dropped. 'They're all gone now but some years ago, when there was still a few of 'em left, another painting was commissioned.'

He pointed to a second, smaller bar.

'They were all gathered together over there and another was done, this time in colour.'

David glanced across to the other bar. On the wall a group of elderly men stared back surrounded by glasses of beer. They didn't look greatly different from the men sitting there now. He found that amusing and was looking from one to another when his attention was taken by a baseball cap.

'Christ.'

He jabbed Tim in the ribs.

'Don't look now. We've got company.'

'Where?'

Tim spun round.

'I said ... don't look now.'

'If I don't bloody look, I won't bloody know what you're talking about.'

'You should lay off the grog, Tim.'

'Relax.' Tim put an arm round David and pulled him off his stool.

'Fucking hell!'

David hardly ever used expletives and, when he did, it was a sign he was badly stressed. 'Can't you get it into your head we're being followed. They're over there ... Baseball Cap and Floppy Hat ... with some ugly bastard who looks like he's wearing a wig.'

'Relax, mate.' Tim propelled David across the floor. 'We need to find out what those mongrels are up to. Get to know your enemy. If you'd been in the army, you'd know that.'

They reached the second bar and David surveyed the trio. There was something very odd about them, like they'd been thrown together in a hurry. Of the three, Baseball Cap was the only one who looked remotely normal. David tried to imagine him in a police uniform and could cope with that.

Floppy Hat was something else. The guy stood limply behind the other two and let out a high-pitched laugh whenever he spoke. There was no way you could imagine him in the force. And there was no way you could imagine the third member of the party as a police officer. He looked like a prize fighter who had lost a few too many bouts and didn't know when to give up.

David winced as the ugly man lent forward and ran his eyes over him, starting at his head and working slowly past his crotch to his feet. For the first time in his life, David wondered what it would be like to be raped.

Tim stared up at the mural.

'Bloody marvellous.'

The remark wasn't addressed to anyone but Baseball Cap took it up.

'Are you an artist?'

'When I've got the time.' Tim held out a hand. 'Tim Price from Canberra.' He pronounced the name of the nation's capital with a bush-Australian intonation. 'This is my mate, Davo. We've got a dive shop.'

'John Cox.' The other offered a hand. 'This is my fishing partner.' He nodded towards Floppy Hat.

'Jim Brown.'

Tim took the limp hand that was offered in his direction.

'G'day, Jim. What d'ya do when you're not fishing?'

'Jim's an electrician like me,' Baseball Cap said before the other man had a chance to reply.

Tim took a swig and turned to the third member of the party.

I've not met yer mate.'

The third man smiled and stretched out a big scarred hand, covered in poorly executed tattoos. He displayed it as he reached towards Tim. On the fingers and thumb, five letters had been crudely tattooed ... D-E-A-T-H. On the other hand, four letters appeared ... L-I-F-E.

'My name's Footsie,' the third man said with a malignant grin. 'I'm a chiroprapist.'

Tim grinned. 'You mean you look after people with crook backs?'

'Very droll, my friend.'

Footsie let out a piercing laugh, more like a cackle than a human sound. It caused others in the bar to turn round. David felt he'd heard it before but couldn't remember where.

'Very droll.'

Footsie looked down at Tim's feet then at David who was barefoot.

'Your friend has pretty toes. I think we could do something with them.'

Again, he laughed. It was the same shrill laugh as before and Floppy Hat was visibly intimidated.

'Are you going fishing too, Footsie?' Tim asked.

The third man examined him analytically, in a way a hunter might examine a kill before butchering it.

'No. I'm here for professional reasons.' He drew in a deep breath. 'I get all my pleasure from my work. I do not feel the need to go out and kill poor little fish.'

'Shark un as son gut ... as the Frogs would say.'

For a moment, it looked as if Baseball Cap would try to correct Tim's faulty French. He opened his lips and said something about each to his own taste then clamped his mouth shut.

Footsie's eyes remained fastened on Tim.

'You do like to show off your superior knowledge. You should learn to be like me. Do not wank off. Hide your lamp under a bushel. Have you not read your bible?'

He turned to Floppy Hat.

'You do not show off your superior knowledge. Do you, my friend?'

Floppy Hat shook his head nervously.

'You do not flaunt your superior knowledge because you cannot flaunt what you do not have. Like I cannot flaunt my left thumb.' He held up his hand and broke into uncontrollable laughter.

Tim looked at the short stub where the fifth digit had once been.

'That would've cut down your scope a bit, mate.'

'Cut down my scope.' Footsie's eyes narrowed and he started to chuckle. 'No, my friend. No one has ever cut down my scope.'

'I mean it restricts you to four-letter words.' Tim grinned back at him. 'If you'd had another piggy on your left hand you could've put death on that too.'

There was a long silence. Baseball Cap and Floppy Hat backed away. Footsie's expression tensed. David expected him to thrust a beer glass in Tim's face and prepared to ward off the blow.

Then, the tension eased.

'You do not understand, my friend.' Footsie smiled at Tim. 'You cannot have death without life. Have you not read your bible?'

Tim reached for his glass and Footsie changed his posture. David recognized a defensive move and guessed the ugly man was familiar with the martial arts.

'You could've got a better job done on those.'

Tim peered at the crude tattoos on Footsie's knuckles.

'If you'll excuse me saying, they look like they was done in the nick using an old needle and ink from the prison printery.'

David took a step back and knocked against Floppy Hat who seemed to be standing behind him for protection. He did not like the way things were developing. The cat-and-mouse game had gone too far. His muscles tensed, anticipating a violent confrontation. But, events took a different turn.

'I like you, my friend.'

Footsie smiled at Tim.

'You and I have the same artistic feelings. I am sure we will meet again soon and bring our relationship to a fruitful conclusion.'

Chapter 12

Gloom.

While David and Tim were in the pub, Humphrey was in the university library, thumbing through the positions vacant advertisements in the national newspapers. He hated the prospect of going back to academia but there was no choice. He'd blown his chances of getting a job with the armed forces or any of the

intelligence organizations showing interest in him. Cecil Sparrow's men had found the cache of documents he had copied as source material for the books and articles he was writing. He felt humiliated and stupid. Many of the papers had high-security classifications. To put it bluntly, he was a high-security risk. The people he wanted to work for would avoid him like the plague when they found out what he had been doing. His eyes alighted on an advertisement for a lecturer in Chinese. He copied out the details. The position didn't appeal to him but he had a daughter to support and a bank account that was deeply in the red.

Chapter 13

Fatal mistake.

It was the middle of the night in Eastern Australia and midday in New York. David inserted his telephone card and dialled.

'Hullo.'

He heard her voice.

'Sue Lynne. I've been phoning.'

'David. I'm so relieved to hear you. I've received your messages. I'm sorry I've not been here to speak to you but I've got the photographs. They arrived today. Where are you now?'

'In Cooktown, Sue Lynne. We're going to get Tong Yee's gold. Tim's checking out the boat. It should be cool. Real cool. We won't have any trouble finding it. We've got a magnetometer, GPS, everything ...'

'What about the parcels? Those you posted in Hong Kong. Have they arrived?'

'Only the one I told you about.'

'I'm worried,' her voiced dropped. 'Those drugs you talked about. I don't know how they got there. The police can pick drugs up so easily. They have dogs at the airports. I don't want you to get into any sort of trouble. I'd never forgive myself if that happened.'

He decided not to tell her about Footsie and his other problems.

'Don't worry, Sue Lynne. It'll work out just fine.'

'David. You must be careful.'

'Sue Lynne, I've got to go. Tim's got the boat in the water.'

'David, take care.'

'I'll phone again tonight ... tell you how much gold we've found.'

He blew kisses down the phone and went to join Tim.

* * * * *

They launched the inflatable into the Endeavour River, close to the spot where Captain Cook had beached his vessel for repairs. David sat at the front and checked the magnetometer. The sensitive piece of equipment was similar to one used by marine archaeologists to retrieve the cannons Cook had thrown overboard when he ran aground 230 years earlier. The cannons had been located with little

difficulty and David hoped for similar success with the gold. It had been hidden in ceramic pots in an underwater cave beside a large anchor. The anchor was big and David figured it would show up strongly on the magnetometer scans.

The reef was about fifteen miles offshore. Tong Yee used to visit it in a sailing boat. He gathered beche-de-mer and other marine delicacies from the reef flats and smuggled gold onto ships anchored there to avoid paying royalties to the colonial government. Tong Yee took twelve hours to make the trip. They would do it in under two. Their first problem was to negotiate the mouth of the river.

It was not the sort of manoeuvre David liked to perform in a strange place and in total darkness. They were leaving in a hurry because they didn't want to be followed by Footsie and his mates. David wished he'd had time to make better preparations. They didn't even know if there was a sandbar at the mouth of the river. Those on the south coast were famous for theirs. Getting out to sea could be hazardous.

In the early days, when they'd just set up the dive shop, business was slack and they'd earned extra money by providing a rescue service at amateur fishing competitions. It was all action then. They had to turn in tight circles just to stay in the same place. The fishing boats would come up to the bar and wait for an opportunity to cross. The trick was to get into a gap between the waves. The problem was to avoid the huge waves that rose up as if from nowhere.

They'd rescued a lot of people. Sometimes the spills had occurred through bad luck, sometimes through incompetence and sometimes through a total disregard for the dangers. David felt they were in that situation now. Waves were breaking ahead. He could hear them over the gentle purr of the motor. He didn't want to sound scared but felt the need to say something.

'Sounds like there's a bit of a bar out there, Timmo.'

'Yeah, mate.'

'We'll have to cross it blind.'

'No worries.' Tim increased the revs.

'But bars can be difficult even in full daylight.'

'Relax, mate. I don't need any light. Driving these things is like making love to a woman. You don't have to see what you're doing. All you have to do is feel her moving under you.'

A wave passed beneath them and the inflatable flexed. David felt the next one approach and braced himself as Tim opened up the throttle. The next wave was even bigger. They took it at an angle and crashed down on the other side. Two waves later they were in open sea.

Tim turned on the global positioning system. The GPS was a present from David's grandfather. The old man had given it to David for his twentieth birthday. The screen gave latitude and longitude and was overlaid by marine charts. Tim was pleased to have it. Getting out would be easy. What came later was less certain. David thought they'd find the gold without difficulty. Tim was far from sure but hadn't said anything about it. He'd learnt from experience that David was inclined to worry. The kid was forever thinking about what could go wrong. It was best not to get him worked up ... tell him things slowly ... wait for the right moment.

There were lots of things Tim had not told David. One was how he'd screwed up when he went to collect the parcel from his old rooming house. David hadn't wanted him to dash in there. He'd said they should think it through. The trouble was when David thought things through you often ended up doing nothing. In this case that could have been best. The parcel contained nothing of value and they'd given themselves away. Baseball Cap was there when he collected it. The fat slob was slumped in an armchair pretending to read a newspaper. Tim hadn't seen his face but he'd recognized his voice when they met in the pub in Cooktown.

That was something to worry about. Footsie was another. The guy was evil. Tim knew people like him in the army. They were called psychopaths. The service did its best to keep them out but some slipped through. They lived entirely for themselves and derived pleasure from causing pain to others. Tim had spent the night dreaming about Footsie. He reminded him of a little boy in his class at school. The boy was a loner. He sat in a corner and didn't mix with the other children. One of his pleasures was making hurtful remarks. Another was killing things. He started with cats and graduated to bigger animals. One day he killed a little girl. Tim felt guilty whenever he thought about it. He and his mates knew what the boy was like. They should have warned their teachers but a stupid schoolboy code prevented them from dobbing him in.

Tim hung onto the controls and watched the sea glide past. It was high tide and most of the reefs were covered. Here and there, waves were breaking on the leeward side. He compared his sightings with the GPS and thought about what Tong Yee had written in the journal. So far everything was checking out to perfection. The guy was clearly good. Tim wished he'd had a chance to meet him. He sat back and took the boat towards the reef, adjusting his speed so that they would arrive at daybreak.

Two hours later the sun rose over a clear horizon and shone in their faces. At the front of the boat, David reached for his Polaroid sunglasses and pulled his hat down over his forehead. Tim was untroubled by the glare. He stood with one hand on the outboard motor and the other shielding his face from the sun.

'There she is, mate ... off to starboard where the water's coming over the reef.'

David adjusted his Polaroids.

'Further to the right,' Tim touched his arm. 'You gotta look for the currents. Over there where the lagoon's emptying through the channels. It's running along beside the reef like it's a river. You can't miss it.'

David vaguely saw lines of disturbance on the surface but couldn't be sure. His eyes had always given him trouble. That was why he'd given up ball games for rock climbing. He looked at the GPS and saw what Tim was talking about. They'd arrived at the reef Charlie had marked on the charts but not where he expected.

'We're at the southern end of Tong Yee's reef.'

'That's right, mate.'

'Why didn't you take us to the north? That's where the big channel is.'

'We can't be sure where it is.'

'But Charlie located it on the satellite maps. We know where it is.'

'We think we do,' Tim said quietly. 'Charlie followed what Tong Yee said in the journal but you've got to remember Tong Yee didn't have a GPS and he didn't have

any satellite maps. All he had was a compass and a good eye for detail. I want to follow what he said and see where it gets us.'

Tim switched off the GPS and turned the boat to the north. It seemed a big waste of time to David. If they'd gone straight to the channel they'd be started by now. There was no point in arguing. He sat back. His eyes were adjusting to the light and he was beginning to take in his surroundings. He soon forgot about the channel and looked around in wonder ... there was so much activity.

A sea eagle flew overhead and joined a flock of seagulls dive-bombing a spot in the ocean. David guessed there was a shoal of fish down there and the birds were crashing in for a feed. He watched for a while but was soon distracted by a flurry of activity in front of the boat. Fish were leaping from the water. Or were they birds? David wasn't sure. They looked a bit like fairy penguins but there was something different about them.

Penguins make a series of leaps, never clear of the water for long. These had taken to the air. They were like fish one moment and birds the next. Then the truth dawned. They were flying fish, a whole flock of them. Or was the term 'school'? He wasn't sure. Perhaps 'squadron' would be a better name. At any rate, the water was far too hot for fairies. He'd always pictured flying fish as gliding. Now he realized they really did fly, using enlarged pectoral fins as wings. They beat them and covered large distances before plunging back beneath the waves.

It was awesome ... just awesome. He'd always wanted to see the Great Barrier Reef. He'd watched endless videos of dive expeditions and read extensively about it. Being there was something different. It was all around. Not squashed up on a flat screen. And the sea was alive. He watched as a huge manta ray left the water and crashed back. It kept up the act for a hundred yards or more, splashing down and rising back up. David guessed it was fleeing from a shark or some other predator.

Tim interrupted his thoughts.

'There's that big bombie over there, Davo.'

David guessed Tim was talking about a bomborra. It was an Aboriginal term and referred to a reef that was too deep to be exposed but sufficiently close to the surface to make its presence known by the disturbance it created.

'Tong Yee spoke about it in the journal,' Tim said.

David felt the change as the inflatable crossed the bombie and felt it again when they emerged on the other side. Tim cut the motor and let the boat drift.

'Okay. We've arrived.'

He turned on the GPS and David lent forward in amazement.

'Good on yer, Timmo. You've got us to the exact spot Charlie marked on the charts. I don't know how you did it but you did. You got us here ... you're the greatest.'

'No, mate.' Tim checked their position on the screen. 'Tong Yee is the greatest. He wrote down those instructions over 100 years ago and they're still good today. I followed them and they checked out. They brought us to the main channel. It's the one that leads through to the lagoon where the Chinese anchored when they didn't want to go into Cooktown. Humph reckons Tong Yee acted as liaison between them and the authorities. He spoke English and knew how to get on with people and things like that ...'

David wasn't listening. Tim watched him put on his facemask and lean over the side. He figured the kid wouldn't have any trouble seeing the coral now. Even with his bad eyesight he could hardly miss it. Once David got his head in the water there would be no more troublesome reflections. He should see down to sixty or more feet.

The boat continued to drift forward and the bottom gave way to a series of low terraces. Then the cliff-like outer edge of the reef appeared. David remained hooked over the side. He'd not bothered to use his snorkel and was holding his breath. Tim figured the kid must have out-sized lungs and a huge amount of self-control. He could keep it up for minutes on end.

David took his head from the water.

'It's just like in the books.'

'What's that, mate?'

'The drop off ... it goes down like it's a cliff.'

'Yeah,' Tim nodded. 'Most of them are like that. They come straight up then you've got the reef flat on top. I don't know why they're like that but they are. I've seen hundreds.'

'It's because of the way they were formed.'

David's face was animated.

'I've read about it. In the Ice Age it was dry land out here. That's because sea levels were lower. The water was locked up in Antarctica. Then the ice melted and the sea rose. That was only 12 000 years ago so there would have been people around. There was a flat plane and a whole lot of hills that ran down the coast. They formed the core of what is now the Great Barrier Reef ...'

Tim listened as David rattled on. The kid was interested in science and things like that. He'd got good grades at school and gone to uni. But he'd not stuck to it. He'd dropped out and his grandfather had put up the money for the dive shop. The Pagets were a strange family. David's mother had gone ballistic when he quit studying but his grandparents were right behind the move. His grandmother had interviewed him for the job. She wanted to be sure David had someone older to look after him. Tim thought about the old woman and couldn't help liking her. She was a tough old bird was Gracie ... not a bit like David's mother.

'So why the drop-off?'

'You mean ... why do the reefs rise up suddenly?'

'Yeah, mate.'

'The hills along the old coast were remnants of an earlier barrier reef,' David explained. 'When the sea level rose again after the Ice Age, coral came in from the continental shelf and recolonized them. It kept growing up. The only thing that stopped it was because it had to stay submerged. That's why the tops of the reef are flat. They're like that because the sea is flat.'

Tim stroked his chin. What the kid said made sense and he wondered why he'd not taken more interest in it. Perhaps it was because his brain worked differently. David wanted to pull things apart and see how they worked. He wanted to capture them on canvas and make a picture out of them.

'It's just awesome.'

David continued to rave on.

'The amazing thing is just how recent it is. The Aboriginals were here 50 000 years ago. They would have had tribal lands down there. The sea came in so fast whole clans could have lost everything in just one lifetime.'

'You mean global warming?'

'Yeah ... just like that.'

David looked into the water and started to talk about campfires and men with dogs. It was as if he was seeing them down there. The kid had got carried away. Only a little while ago he was obsessed by a bunch of guys who were trailing them. Now he was crapping on about Aboriginals and dingoes. For some reason that was connected to the gold.

'It's all coming together.'

'What is, mate?'

'We'll soon find the gold.'

'What makes you think that?'

'We've got to where Tong Yee described in his journal. You turned off the GPS and brought us here. It's only a matter of time now.'

'It might take longer than you think.'

'You said Tong Yee was brilliant.'

'Yeah,' Tim tried to explain. 'He told us where to find the channel. He didn't say anything about the cave.'

'He said it was beside a big anchor.'

'Mate! That was 100 years ago. It'll be covered over by now.'

'That's what people said about Cook's cannons but those scientists found them first time,' David insisted. 'They were covered in coral but that didn't matter. The magnetometer picked them up on the first pass.'

Their magnetometer was attached to a sled of the type used to tow divers underwater. David took it down and Tim remained in the boat. They started on the reef flat. The water was shallow there: no more than six feet. The big problem was to avoid crashing into things. Tim made a wide sweep out towards the lagoon then returned towards the drop-off. At first, David was disappointed. He'd expected to see delicate corals teeming with brilliantly coloured fish, like in the dive videos. But the corals on the reef flat were lumpy and the fish were far from impressive.

Then everything changed. Tim took him to the drop-off and he descended into a different world. The corals were far more impressive now. They branched out from the vertical face and poked up on ledges. On the terraces below, giant clams nestled between huge brain corals. David saw them close their shells as his shadow passed over the light-sensitive spots on their flesh. He was now at fifty feet. That was deeper than he intended to go but the temptation to descend further was hard to resist.

He tilted the sled and went down to seventy. At that depth his bottom time would be much shorter. David didn't care. He was determined to see some of the delicate corals that lived in the still waters of the deep. A patch of staghorn caught his eye.

There was a picture of the magnificently branched coral on the dive shop wall. David had enthused to customers about it, pretending that he was a regular visitor to the Great Barrier Reef. Now he wanted to see it for real. He swooped

down and found that the polyps were out. The tiny coral animals were in their feeding mode, brilliant blue against the white coral sand.

He would have stayed longer but had no choice. Tim was keeping up a steady pace in the inflatable and the sled was bound to follow. He left the staghorn and was soon chasing a manta ray. It fled before him and entered a chasm. Suddenly the towrope went slack. David surfaced and heard Tim's voice.

'We went over something big back there ...'

David listened as Tim told him about the powerful signal he had received and felt stupid. There was a monitor on the sled and he'd failed to keep an eye on it. He wondered what else he had missed.

'You'd better go back ... check it out.'

He squeezed air from his buoyancy vest and sank below the waves. What followed was depressing. He retraced his steps and soon discovered what Tim was talking about. The monitor flashed as he left the chasm and the cause wasn't hard to find. A forty-foot steel container of the sort carried on the decks of modern cargo vessels lay half-buried in sand. He examined the markings. It came from Taiwan. Not more than twenty years old, the container was already covered in coral. What would it be like in another twenty? What would it be like in a hundred? That was how long Tong Yee's gold had been there. David had visions of pots filled with gold dust, encrusted with coral and buried far beneath the sand.

Why hadn't Charlie gone after the gold? Humphrey had asked that question and he'd replied that half a million bucks was chicken feed to Charlie. Now David realized that was only half the answer. The gold might be far harder to find than he'd imagined.

His enthusiasm had been based on the ease with which Captain Cook's cannons had been retrieved. But the Captain's log gave precise coordinates for the cannons while Tong Yee's journal gave a vague location for the gold.

To make matters worse, the Captain jettisoned the cannons onto the reef flat and Tong Yee hid the gold beyond the drop-off. Waves pounded the reef flat, coral grew slowly and sand was washed away as quickly as it was deposited. But in the deeper waters, where the gold was hidden, coral grew fast and sand was deposited at an alarming rate. David's confidence took a severe knock. He gave three sharp tugs on the tow rope. It was the signal for Tim to start the motor.

The next three hours were depressing. The sled covered the entire search area and a variety of readings was recorded on the magnetometer. Most relating to things buried beneath the sand. David pointed the sled upwards, reached the inflatable and climbed on board. He placed his scuba tank at the front and started to strip off his gear.

'What are we going to do, Timmo?'

'What do you mean?'

'You were right. We're not going to find the gold today.'

'No sweat, mate. We'll just keep looking.'

'But we don't have time.' David unbuckled his dive knife. 'We've got to get this thing done quickly.'

'No we don't.'

'But there's those three psychopaths trailing us.'

'One psychopath and two dickheads,' Tim corrected him. 'We'll sort those bastards out. Stop worrying.'

David slipped off his buoyancy vest.

'I just want to know who they are.'

'I've been trying to work that out.' Tim picked up David's dive computer from the bottom of the boat. 'The other night I thought they were police. I've seen that Baseball Cap before. He was in my old place when I went to collect the parcels.'

David's head went into a spin.

'Christ. That's what I was worried about.' He tugged at the zip of his wetsuit. 'That's why I said we should play it cool.'

'Sorry, Dave. You were right. I shouldn't have dashed in there.'

David continued to struggle with the zip.

Tim watched his face redden and came to his aid.

'You're overheating, mate. You've got hyperthermia. It's that thick wetsuit of yours. It's not meant for the tropics. It's alright when you're in the water but when you get out it does something terrible to you.'

He pulled the zip down and helped David strip off. He'd brought two Mexican hats with him and placed one on his young friend's head. Then he threw water over him and fanned him with a towel. David's temperature soon returned to normal.

'It comes on real quick,' Tim warned. 'It's not like hypothermia when you lose heat in cold water. You can feel that coming on and do something about it. The problem with hyperthermia is you don't get the same warning. It hits you and then it can be too late.'

David couldn't agree more. One moment he was totally fit, the next he was struggling like a baby. His mind cleared and his fears flooded back. He swigged down a cool drink then voiced his concerns.

'Do you think Footsie was someone they met in the pub?'

'What was that, mate?'

'Baseball Cap and that other dickhead. They didn't look real friendly with him. Perhaps he'd just pushed himself onto them ... like he was trying to bum drinks.'

Tim reached for the other hat. 'I wondered about that. Then, I saw them afterwards getting into their Landcruiser. They drove off with Footsie like he was part of their group.'

David squeezed suntan lotion onto his arm. 'Those two creeps. They look more like public servants than police.'

'Yeah,' Tim nodded. 'I've got mates in the police and they're nothing like them. That Baseball Cap might have something about him but Floppy Hat is a real useless prick. There's no way he'd be let into the force. You wouldn't trust the silly bastard to feed the goldfish.'

David laughed. He'd heard Tim's goldfish joke before and had come to be irritated by it. This time it was comforting. It was like old times again ... like when they'd just gone into partnership. His grandfather had given them a loan on the understanding that the older and more experienced Tim would be responsible for the operational side of the business. Aunt Grace had interviewed Tim and given the partnership her approval. There were times when David almost liked the old lady.

The icebox had soft drink cans and plastic containers of food. Tim had bought them from an Italian restaurant. After Malaysian, Italian was his favourite cuisine. David found antipasto, pasta with tomato sauce and garlic prawns. They ate with their fingers using the ocean as a finger bowl. It was like old times again. Tim was in control and David was content to leave the hard decisions to his older mate.

'That boat?'

David pointed lazily at a catamaran rigged for fishing.

'Yeah. I've been watching them.'

'Do you think they're for real?'

'Yeah.' Tim reached for a tub of olives. 'They're pulling in fish. Don't worry about them. Lie back and take a rest. The sun's up. It's time for a kip.'

They dozed. David didn't know for how long. The boat had swung round and the sun was shining in his eyes when he woke.

'Come on, Davo.'

He heard Tim's voice and struggled into a sitting position. Tim was in the water, hanging onto the side of the boat.

'It's time for a fun dive.'

David was in no mood for another dive. He pulled on his scuba gear reluctantly, flopped into the water and followed Tim down the anchor line.

It wasn't a textbook entry and it wasn't a textbook descent. David knew that he had broken all the rules. He had not checked his gear and he had gone down too fast. He had often lectured his students on the dangers of rapid descent.

At thirty feet, you have added enough excess pressure to your system to inflate the tires of a small car. It is not reasonable to expect the gases in your body to reach instantaneous equilibrium.

He arrived at the bottom feeling disoriented. Tim was nowhere in sight. That was another mistake. Divers should always maintain contact with their buddies. David waited for his head to clear then went to look for him. After a frustrating search, he found Tim lying on the bottom, peering beneath a coral outcrop.

David knew what his friend was doing. Tim could never resist a feed of crayfish and wasn't fussed by the laws forbidding him to take the crustacean on scuba gear. He watched as Tim probed in holes and crevices with a gloved hand ... and listened.

The sounds of the tropics were new to David. He was familiar with those of colder waters but these were different. There was a faint whistling that he associated with dolphins but a loud chomping noise was harder to identify. He heard it between breaths and traced it to a shoal of parrot fish that were chewing up dead coral with their bird-like beaks. He watched them charge into the coral like mechanical diggers and bite off chunks.

Then he heard another sound. It started suddenly and, like all underwater sounds, had no direction. There was no way of telling where it came from ... only that it was getting louder. The high-pitched whine of an outboard motor sent shivers down his spine. He looked up and saw a dark form racing through the waves.

Tim had a large crayfish in his gloved hand when David appeared. The kid was more agitated than usual. Tim guessed it was the cray. David thought you had to do everything by the book. He came from that sort of family.

The Pagets thought that because someone made a law you had to obey it. He'd tried to explain that laws were made to be broken but the kid wouldn't listen. He couldn't understand that it made no difference how you caught your crays. They were just as dead once you got them in the pot. He ignored David and continued with what he was doing.

The tricky part came next. Crays are equipped with armoured plates and are capable of inflicting nasty wounds with a swipe of their powerful tails. More to the point, their struggles send out vibrations that can alert every shark for miles around. Tim held the cray firmly and was about to dispatch it to a culinary afterlife when David grabbed his shoulder and forced him to take notice.

The kid was giving the divers' danger signal with one hand and jabbing at the surface with the other. Tim looked up and saw the unmistakable shape of a catamaran against the glare of the sky. The cat slowed as it neared the inflatable and Tim felt a rush of adrenalin. All of a sudden, Footsie's taunt, about meeting soon, took on a new and urgent meaning.

He released the crayfish and the crustacean made a dash for freedom. Tail twitching, it zigzagged through the water and was intercepted. A shark appeared and the cray disappeared. Tim felt the disturbance as the powerful body swept past but scarcely noticed the outcome. The shark and the cray weren't important. All that mattered was to get back to the inflatable and there wasn't a moment to lose. He grabbed his speargun and finned furiously towards the anchor, fitting a powerhead to the spear on the way.

A cloud of sand rose when he got there. Tim knew what was happening. The anchor chain was being dragged over the seabed in a series of jerks. It was the divers' worst nightmare. They were far out to sea and someone was trying to steal their boat.

He came close to the chain but not close enough. The chain tightened and the anchor shot away in a cloud of bubbles. It wasn't difficult to work out what was happening. The cat was towing the inflatable and the anchor was being dragged along. His chance of catching it had fallen to zero.

Then a surprising thing happened. The chain went slack and a shape appeared in the water. Whoever had been pulling in the anchor had fallen overboard. The anchor drifted down and Tim grabbed it. Moments later, the chain tightened and he was dragged along ... forwards and upwards.

His head broke surface and he was treated to a familiar sight. The rear end of Baseball Cap was bouncing along in the waves. The slob had fallen out of the inflatable and was struggling to get back. Footsie's maniacal laughter sounded above the din. The ugly man had discarded his wig and stood bald-headed at the controls, waving a handgun. He opened up the engines when he saw Tim.

Tim rose up and the top part of his body came clear of the water. Footsie leered and Tim leered back. It was like a replay of their confrontation in the pub. Tim knew Footsie's sort. The guy was a psychopath. You only had to trigger his neurosis and you had him beaten. He held onto the chain with one hand and gestured with the other, thrusting his speargun in the air.

'Cock sucker!'

He jabbed away and Footsie took his hands off the controls to return the insult.

'Mother fucker!'

They continued to exchange insults and Footsie was still yelling when he lost control and the catamaran ploughed up onto the reef flat. The ugly man cannoned forward. The engines revved wildly and the cat vanished in a cloud of spray. Tim sank back into the water and waited for David.

‘What happened?’

‘The silly bastard drove up onto the reef.’

‘What you going to do?’

‘Sink ‘em and get our boat back.’

Tim dragged himself along the anchor line and David followed. The water was so shallow they had to leave it in places and struggle over sharp coral. They reached the cat as the engines were turned off.

‘Right, mate. Get under before they see us.’

Tim ducked under the boat and David squeezed in behind. One of the hulls was on the reef and badly damaged. The other was bobbing up and down in the waves ... threatening to crush them against the coral.

Tim flattened himself on the sandy bottom and aimed his speargun upwards. It wasn't the best place to mount an attack. His spear would scarcely leave the gun before it reached its target but he had no option. Their only chance was to sink the cat and escape in the confusion.

He squeezed the trigger, the spear shot forward, the powerhead exploded and a jagged hole appeared in the fiberglass hull. Air gushed and the cat began to sink. On the deck, above, pandemonium broke out. Footsie yelled and Floppy Hat screamed like an idiot. Baseball Cap's voice sounded over the din, trying to bring the situation under control.

‘We'll have to transfer to their boat. Help me ...’

There was more maniacal laughter from Footsie and the sound of heavy breathing from Baseball Cap.

‘The bloody thing's stuck!’

More heavy breathing.

‘O'Neill! Get off your fucking arse!’

Tim reloaded his speargun and signalled to David. If they didn't leave they'd be trapped. He swam towards the stern. One of the motors was clear of the water. The other was totally submerged. He squirmed through the shrinking gap and came out on the other side.

Puffs of sand rose as he made his exit. Tim knew what was happening. He'd been on manoeuvres when live ammunition was used. Someone was firing at him and they were not making allowance for the way light is bent when it enters water. They were shooting at his image but he was not along the line of sight.

If he didn't act fast he was dead meat. Tim released his weight-belt, slammed his feet on the bottom and rocketed up. His body left the water and he came face-to-face with Footsie. They fired together. Tim's spear left his gun and the resulting explosion left a red gouge on the chest of someone standing behind the ugly man.

A fraction of a second later Footsie's bullets smashed into Tim's chest penetrating his lungs and collapsing them. Others hit him in the face and exited through the back of his skull leaving a cloud of foam. His body twitched and the twitching seemed to go on forever.

David was thrown into a state of shock. Then a rush of adrenalin concentrated his thoughts. He couldn't stay where he was. The catamaran was sinking and he had to get out from under it. He headed for the front and found his way blocked. His only chance was to leave by the rear. He shut his mind to the horror of the situation and swam through the red haze where Tim had once been.

The inflatable was nearby. He struggled to lift the outboard motor free of the coral but it wouldn't come. At one stage his head left the water and he heard shouting. Baseball Cap was screaming and Footsie was yelling at Floppy Hat, threatening to shoot him.

The motor came free and the inflatable was swept away by the current. Bullets smashed into it, throwing up spray, ripping holes in the side. David followed at a distance, breathing as little as possible so that his bubbles wouldn't betray his position. He expected the inflatable to sink at any moment but the boat was constructed of airtight compartments and some were still intact. When the shooting stopped he swam over to inspect the damage.

The motor hung down and the front of the boat stuck up. The water container was still in place but most of their gear had gone. The icebox was bobbing in the waves some distance away. David decided to abandon it. The delicacies inside weren't worth the effort. He had the water container and that was all that mattered.

Chapter 14

Kirstin investigates.

That same afternoon as David was struggling for his life in the tropical waters of the Great Barrier Reef, Kirstin Hansen and her granddaughter, Elizabeth, were attending a cultural function on the shore of Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin. It was an ecumenical affair and the main Christian denominations were represented. Elizabeth joined some friends and Kirstin was free to wander. She passed groups engaged in Greek dancing, Scottish reels and Irish jigs. Beneath a tree she found what she was looking for. Some ladies were collecting money for a school in Africa and Cecilia Paget was amongst them. She appeared more on edge than usual and her eyes were red as if she had been crying.

'Kirstin, could you spare a moment?'

Cecilia ran across to her.

'I'm so worried. I just don't know what to think ...'

'Is it David?' Kirstin prompted. 'I understand there was an unfortunate incident off Montague Island.'

'Oh. I wish that were all.' Cecilia recounted the fight on the stairs and the appalling impression it had created.

'Maybe Harald's not as badly injured as he thinks,' Kirstin suggested.

'I don't think he is. I'm sure he's exaggerating.'

It started to rain and Kirstin suggested that they should retreat to a nearby restaurant. There Cecilia poured out her worries over cups of weak tea and buttered scones. Most of what she said, Kirstin already knew but there were important exceptions. It came as a surprise to learn that Sue Lynne was not David's aunt but his cousin's wife.

The Paget family evidently had a poor understanding of family relationships and tended to call everyone 'uncle' or 'auntie', irrespective of how they fitted into the family tree. It was an even greater surprise to learn that twenty-year-old David had, allegedly, been having an affair with thirty-five-year-old Sue Lynne.

Chapter 15

Karma.

David glanced at his watch. Almost two hours had passed since Tim's death and his escape from Footsie's bullets. The current had taken him far away from the catamaran and its homicidal crew. He pictured them stuck on the reef and wondered about their next move. It was late afternoon and the sun was low in the sky. He had detached the outboard motor and the inflatable was lying half-submerged on the surface. Most of their gear had been lost but he still had the water container. The five gallons would last a week or more.

His big fear was sharks and sun. Without the canopy, he'd fry if he didn't get into the water and he'd be at the mercy of the sharks if he did. David tried to tell himself that sharks weren't a threat. He'd taught that in his dive courses and one part of his mind knew it was true. Another told a different story. It said that scuba divers are rarely taken by sharks but people who spend too much time on the surface run the risk of being scavenged. Creatures on the surface are usually dead or dying ... and get eaten. Sharks perform that function at sea like vultures do on land.

It was best not to think about it. Negative thoughts only make things worse. What mattered was to think positive. That meant you had to clear your head. His martial arts instructor was a Zen enthusiast. He said the Buddhists did it by reciting mantras. David didn't know any and fell back on nursery rhymes.

'Three blind mice. Three blind mice.

See how they run ...'

He chanted over and over again and his mind began to clear. The horror of Tim's death and the fear of dying were replaced by a feeling of detachment. It was as if he had left his body and was looking down at himself. His predicament was now clear and it no longer frightened him. He was fifteen nautical miles offshore in a half-inflated boat and was at the mercy of the currents. So one question mattered before all others.

Where were the currents taking him?

Without the GPS there seemed no way of telling. His heart sank. Then he thought of his father. Shortly before his fatal posting to the Middle East, they had

gone on a sailing trip. It was just the two of them in a small boat. The weather was fine and they had left New Haven and crossed to Long Island. On the way his father told him about the navigational aids used by the Vikings. He had explained that the old seafarers had a sun compass that gave latitude and a magnetic compass that gave direction. In shallow waters they used a plumb line to measure depth and current.

David was thankful for that piece of information. There was a coiled fishing line in a pocket of the boat. He took it out, fitted a heavy weight and threw it over the side. After a while the line touched bottom and snagged. He let it out, arm over arm, glancing at his dive compass and counting. He soon had a result. The boat was drifting at about one-and-a-half knots in a north-westerly direction. He breathed a sigh of relief. The boat was heading towards shore. With any luck he'd see land when the sun came up.

Day dawned and he hardly noticed. His fears had been of sharks, hyperthermia, sunburn and dehydration. After fifteen hours he'd not seen a shark, he was cold and it was pouring with rain. He reached for the fishing line and cast it over the side. To his relief it soon touched bottom and the current was in his favour.

Hours passed, the sun came out and he was no longer cold. Trees appeared on the horizon. David saw them through the haze of mucous that had built up around his contact lenses. He fumbled for the fishing line and went through the motions of measuring depth and current. The weight hit bottom almost immediately. He looked at his compass, played out the line and started counting. If he'd not been so tired, he wouldn't have bothered. He was in shallow water and the line was dragging to the side.

David recalled that currents did that when they approached land. They couldn't run ashore so they turned. Their next trick was to head back out to sea. He'd imagined himself cast up on a sandy beach but that wasn't going to happen. The current wouldn't take him there and the wind wouldn't blow him there. The inflatable was too low in the water to be blown anywhere. His mind numbed and a wave of nausea swept over him.

Fears of hyperthermia flooded back. He was overheating. If he didn't do something he'd be too weak to do anything. His fingers yanked at the zip of his wetsuit. The jacket came off and he loosened the straps holding the bottom in place. His mind was made up. There was no point in staying where he was.

The shore was only a mile or so away. That was no great distance. If the sharks got him that was his karma. If they didn't, he'd wade to shore and find a track that led somewhere. After that it would be just a matter of time before he reached safety.

He slipped into the water and started to swim, glancing up every so often to check his position. Visions of a sandy beach spurred him on. He kept telling himself it was only a matter of time before he got there. A tree appeared. He swam towards it and recognized a mangrove. More appeared. Then more. To his horror, they increased in number until they formed a dense thicket. He had arrived at a most terrible place.

David knew about mangrove swamps. He'd seen them from the air. They were vast and impenetrable expanses of tangled vegetation cut by meandering

waterways. He had entered crocodile country and the risk from sharks hadn't gone away.

His feet sank into ooze and his fins came off as he struggled to get free. The effort was exhausting and he collapsed back into the muddy water, breathing fitfully through his snorkel. He'd used his last store of energy in a desperate attempt to get to shore only to find it was an illusion.

The current carried him along. At some stage the bottom of his wetsuit came off. Apart from his dive watch, mask and snorkel, he was now as naked as the day he was born. The sun beat down. Jellyfish attacked his bare flesh. He sank into a stupor and might have remained in that state if the cries of birds hadn't caused him to stir. He looked up and saw a line of pelicans on a mud bank. They watched as he was swept through a channel into a lagoon fringed with palm trees.

'Hang on, mate.'

He heard a boy's voice and wondered if he was dreaming.

'Hang on, mate.'

He heard it again.

'I'm coming.'

A small hand pulled him out of the mud and led him to shore. David struggled to stay on his feet. His rescuer was about eleven years old, jet black and as naked as himself. The boy set him down in the shade of a palm tree and ran to some bushes. He returned, dressed in shorts and carrying a towel.

'You'd better put that round you, mate.'

David laid the towel over his loins and the boy vanished. He wondered if he was hallucinating. The kid had drifted in. One moment he was naked, the next dressed. Then he'd disappeared. David lay on his back and listened. In the distance the boy was shouting excitedly. Voices answered ... female voices.

'Rebecca. Go and get my medical bag.'

They approached. Big hands pulled him around. His pulse was taken. An eyelid was pushed up and one of his contact lenses was removed. David smelt antiseptic and felt his wounds being treated.

Against all odds, he'd fallen on his feet.

Report appearing in the tabloid Pics on Sunday

The boy who couldn't tell right from wrong ... he had everything, writes Cynthia Sponge.

David Paget had everything money could buy but that didn't satisfy the twenty-year-old rich kid from Canberra's plush suburb of Red Hill. He wanted excitement.

Late on Friday, the university dropout got more than he bargained for. In the clear blue waters of the Great Barrier Reef, David saw his best friend, Timothy (Timmo) Price, shoot and kill narcotics officer, Steven Milkovitz.

Seconds later Price was himself dead, shot by Officer Milkovitz's colleague, Rodney O'Neill. Officer O'Neill said he had no choice but to fire at his attacker.

'He had already holed one of our hulls with an explosive charge and I expected him to fire at the other,' he said.

'I didn't shoot to kill. I did my best to avoid serious injuries but with my boat being thrown around in the waves it wasn't easy. I shot in self-defence.'

Officers O'Neill and Milkovitz had earlier removed two scuba tanks, packed with cocaine, from the inflatable boat used by Paget and Price. The tanks are believed to have been dropped on the Barrier Reef by drug runners operating from a luxury yacht.

'We had information which led us to believe that Paget and Price had been assigned to retrieve the tanks,' Officer O'Neill said.

Paget and Price opened a scuba store together a year ago. It was a case of rich boy meets poor boy. They came from different backgrounds but had a lot in common. Both had a history of violence.

From his bed in the Montano Clinic, David's thirty-five-year-old cousin, Harald Paget, recalled how he had always found David threatening, even as a little boy.

'As he got bigger, his aggressive nature became increasingly worrying,' Mr Paget said.

Two weeks ago Harald Paget received severe spinal injuries when knocked downstairs by his younger cousin at a family reunion to mark their grandfather's birthday...

The newspaper continued with an account of Tim's childhood with his mother in a one-bedroom apartment in central Sydney, contrasting it with the affluence of the Paget household. There was a photograph of six-year-old David, looking very aggressive with a toy pistol, and another of him with Tim in full scuba gear. They carried spear guns, which they were pointing at the camera. The sun was in David's eyes and he was squinting in a way that made him look moronic.

Chapter 16

Aghast.

Elizabeth Hansen left her bicycle in the garage and ran into the house. She'd been at the swimming pool with friends and could not believe what they were saying. A few days earlier she'd told them about David Paget and how he'd had dinner with them. Now they were saying that David had killed a policeman and there was a manhunt going on for him.

It had to be a cruel joke. She went into the family room and found a newspaper. It was open at the middle pages. Her heart fell. There, staring her in the face, was a photograph of David and Tim with spear guns. She read the caption and snatched up the paper.

'Daddy, have you read what it says?'

She ran into the kitchen.

'It can't be true. David's not like that.'

Humphrey placed his arms around his daughter.

'We don't know what to believe, my darling, and we certainly don't believe things just because we read about them in newspapers.'

'I can't believe it.'

Elizabeth shook uncontrollably.

'Melanie Milkovitz is in my class. It's her dad that was killed. I just can't think what I'm going to say when I see her next ... it's all so terrible.'

'You don't have to say anything,' Humphrey said softly.

'But I can't just say nothing.'

Elizabeth dissolved in tears and ran from the room.

Humphrey returned to his cooking. His world had fallen apart and the repetitive action of cutting up vegetables was soothing. He'd not been sacked. Instead, he'd been consigned to the unallocated list and was awaiting a full investigation of his case. He was a soul in limbo, hovering between unemployment and reinstatement.

He would either get the sack or return to the Narcotics Bureau. Neither was appealing but there was a consolation: he was still on full pay. He finished preparing the vegetables and was wondering if he should add more chilli to his mix when Elizabeth's high-pitched voice announced the arrival of a visitor.

'Daddy, a lady's just come in on a big motorcycle.'

Humphrey went to the window and saw Janet Pulnitz. She was dressed in a leather jacket, emblazoned with signs of the zodiac and witchcraft symbols: part of her undercover gear for infiltrating motorcycle gangs. He went to the door and let her in.

'Humphrey, have you read the newspapers?'

'I've done little else.'

Humphrey led her into the house and introduced her to Kirstin then remembered the meal he was cooking.

'Oops. My curry's burning.'

He ran into the kitchen and pulled the pan from the flames. The meat had begun to stick but a dash of vinegar solved that problem. He added garam masala and reached for the tamarind paste. In the other room, Kirstin and Janet were talking. He had wondered how his mother would take to Janet. Now he knew. They had struck up an immediate and vibrant relationship.

'What weapons do you carry?' Kirstin asked.

'I'm not working for them anymore,' Janet replied. 'I got the push ... like Humphrey.'

'Well. What weapons did you carry?'

'We were issued with a standard regulation snub nose pistol. It has its good points but isn't much use in close-up work. It's far too difficult to conceal, particularly when you're close to a guy.'

Kirstin gave a deep, throaty laugh that Humphrey had never heard before. 'In my day they issued us with a tiny little thing. They were obsessed by the thought we'd be violated. It was of a size that would fit into the smallest handbag. I wore my Elvis gear when I went out on assignments ...'

Humphrey could scarcely believe his ears. He'd added too much chilli and was trying to remove it when Kirstin subjected him to a further shock.

'I used to hang out in the Hong Kong Bar of the Commonwealth Hotel. I was assigned to Chinese businessmen. I sat there for hours, sipping orange juice, listening to their conversations.'

'Was that during the Vietnam War?'

'More in the aftermath of the Korean War ...'

Humphrey poured two glasses of beer and took them to where the two women were sitting. He placed one in front of Janet then confronted his mother.

'Who was looking after me when you were hanging around in the Commonwealth Hotel?'

Kirstin reflected a moment.

'Mrs Gupta.'

Humphrey remembered an Indian lady who did not approve of his mother. In the past he'd put that down to cultural differences. Now, he was beginning to have second thoughts.

'It was amazing what you could get them to say ...'

Kirstin continued to reminisce and Humphrey returned to his cooking. There could be little doubt that Janet wouldn't be leaving in a hurry. He found some prawns to add to the curry and hunted in the wine rack for a suitable accompaniment. If Janet was staying to dinner, he might as well make the best of it.

Dinner was served and he was applauded for his culinary skills. Every dish was consumed and wiped clean. Janet helped Elizabeth with the washing up. Kirstin put on a record of Chinese water music and Humphrey produced a bottle of his best malt whisky. It was the signal for his daughter to go to bed. The three adults retired to the family room and the conversation moved to the topic that was foremost in their minds.

'They were set up.'

Janet brought her fist down on the table.

'I know drug dealers when I see them and those boys were not into drugs.'

'Who do you think was behind it?' Kirstin asked.

'There's this Chinese auntie thing. What do we know about her?'

'Sue Lynne is his cousin's wife,' Kirstin said.

'You mean Harald? The one he's alleged to have assaulted?'

'Yes,' Kirstin nodded.

'Okay.' Janet held up her glass for a refill. 'Correct me if I'm wrong. Harald's wife, Sue Lynne, went off to live with Uncle Charlie a couple of years ago. Charlie was killed in a diving accident in the Philippines and she remained in New York where she seduced David.'

'That is broadly correct.'

Humphrey poured Janet a generous refill and watched it vanish down her throat. She placed the glass on the table and he decided it was time to return the malt to the cabinet.

'Okay. Harald Paget is David's cousin. Who's Charlie?'

Humphrey produced a bottle of red wine and filled Janet's glass.

'Charlie is Harald's father and David's uncle,' Kirstin said. 'He's Cecilia's older brother.'

'Jesus. This Paget family takes a bit of understanding.' Janet drew a diagram in spilt wine and studied it. 'Cecilia is David's mother. Charlie and Cecilia are brother and sister. Their father is Sir George Paget. So why is David's name Paget? Shouldn't it be Smith or Brown or something?'

'He's a love child,' Kirstin said. 'Cecilia returned from America with him.'

'You mean David's mother banged up? I thought she wasn't the sort.'

'They're the very ones who find themselves in that predicament,' Kirstin replied knowledgeably. 'The others know how to avoid it.'

Janet mused over the Paget family tree and thought about its various twigs and branches. Humphrey was embarrassed. Like David, he shared his mother's family name. As a child he'd wondered about his father. Other kids had dads that came in cars and picked them up from school. His mother wouldn't tell him about his dad. Over the years, he'd come to accept that but his orderly mind wanted to know about his origins. He didn't care how his mother had become pregnant. He just wanted to know about his father.

'Harald's a funny name,' Janet said.

'Why?' Kirstin asked.

'It's an old man's name like Reginald or Percy. It's just not used anymore. I expected him to be ancient. I was surprised when I found he wasn't much older than me.'

'His mother belongs to an older generation,' Kirstin explained. 'She probably chose it.'

'How old is she?'

'I don't know,' Kirstin shrugged. 'But she would have to be a lot older than Charlie. She was well established in the business world when he married her.'

'You mean Charlie married a much older woman?'

Kirstin hesitated. 'He made an honest woman of her.'

'He what?'

'She was pregnant with Harald.'

'So?'

'In those days it wasn't fashionable for business ladies to become single mothers.' Kirstin's concentration started to stray. 'Of course, it didn't last.'

'You mean they got divorced?'

'Drifted apart would be a better way to describe it. They both had their separate interests.'

'Did you know them?'

'I knew Charlie.' Kirstin smiled. 'He dated me. That was the term used in those days.'

'You mean, you knew him well?'

'Canberra was a very small place then. Everybody knew everybody else. Charlie was my boss' son.'

'What sort of person was he?'

Kirstin's eyes glazed over. 'Charming. Intelligent. Seductive. Irresponsible. He was the sort of man you could really fall for.'

Janet moved closer. 'I know what you mean.'

Humphrey felt acutely embarrassed.

'I had a small child...'

Kirstin continued to relate aspects of her life Humphrey hadn't even dreamed of. He shut his mind to the conversation. He preferred not to listen and hunted for something to do.

It was garbage night and he decided to put the wheelie bins out. He left by the back door and trundled them into the road. Then he went into the kitchen and taped a length of butchers' paper to the table. Finally, having raided Elizabeth's school bag for felt pens, he strode into the family room.

'Right. Ladies. We're trained professionals. It's time to start behaving in a professional manner.'

They brought their drinks into the kitchen and watched Humphrey sketch out a case diagram. He completed the first of his sheets and taped it to the wall.

Janet scanned the list of names. Sue Lynne, Charles, David, Doris, Tong Yee, Tim, Humphrey, Janet, Rodney, Steve, Harald ... it wasn't much of a list.

'How about Rosie?' she said. 'You know how David described his visit to Doris' flat. He collected the suitcase and Doris said the contents would teach Rosie a lesson and Charlie was somehow involved.'

'Good point, Janet.'

Humphrey wrote Rosie in black and used the black pen to trace the links with Doris, Charlie and the suitcase.

'There's another identity we should include.'

Janet reached in her bag and produced some photographs.

'I took these in the pub in Narooma. I used them in my report but kept the spares to give to the boys.'

Humphrey sorted through the prints. They were taken after Tim had produced the photographs of Bigus Dickus and others. There was a shot of David trying to retrieve them and another of himself with three giggling girls. In another, the solicitor was trying to dissociate himself from the group.

There were about twenty shots in all and he soon discovered what Janet was talking about. In several a stranger appeared. He was a man with gross, almost comical features. Humphrey placed a finger over the hairline and studied the face.

'He's wearing a wig,' Janet said.

Humphrey nodded.

'Do you know who he is?'

'No. But I've seen that face before.'

He shuffled the photographs like a card player and produced a shot of the stranger holding one of the porno prints. In another, taken a fraction of a second later, the print had vanished.

'Okay.' Janet stood back from the table. 'There were six of 'em. Tim was left with The Rabbi and The Major. What did you get, Humphles?'

'I was able retrieve Colonel Bigus Dickus and Captain Slim. That leaves The Bishop and The Sergeant.'

Janet peered at the butcher paper.

'I took The Bishop so it seems safe to assume that Mr Wig slipped The Sergeant up his sleeve between those two shots.'

See Annex 1

Janet picked up the red pen and wrote Wig on the butchers' paper. Then she used the black pen to connect the name with the porno prints and suitcase. The diagram was beginning to take shape. Kirstin took the blue pen and added more information. Humphrey refilled the coffee percolator. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 17

Cruel awakening.

The monsoon rains had started again. Without warning the sky opened and colossal drops pounded against the roof of the van. David rolled over and looked at his watch. It was difficult to keep track of time. He tried to work it out. Tim had been killed on Thursday and he had spent Friday in the water before being rescued. Two or more days had passed since then but he couldn't be sure. So much was a blur.

The people who had rescued him said he'd suffered jellyfish stings and was being treated for them. Their name was Longboat and there were four of them. Mum had medical skills and was competent in everything she did. Dad hardly spoke. Rebecca was about his own age and little brother, Daniel, was much younger. The family was on holidays and had pitched camp in this remote location to enjoy some peace and quiet before returning to the hustle and bustle of modern life. Earlier, he'd heard Rebecca arguing with her father, saying it was stupid to have gone off to such a wild place without a phone.

He placed his arm over his eyes and tried to re-enter the world of sleep. Being awake brought back cruel memories. The taste of blood still hung in his mouth. He'd had to swim through a cloud of it to escape Footsie's bullets. He curled up and tried to think positive thoughts. But the effort was too much. His mind kept drifting back to the terrible few seconds following Tim's death. The incident had been replaying in his mind over and over again. Tim's body had twitched like an injured crayfish. In his dreams a shark had dashed in. But, in his more wakeful moments, David knew there was no shark. Tim had died because the back of his head had been blown away.

He was awakened by the sound of the van door opening. Daniel bounced in.

'Push over, mate. I've got to hide this.'

The boy levered him to one side.

'It's my dad. He said I wasn't to take it on holidays.'

Small fingers fastened round the screw that held the flap of the rear light compartment in place.

'My dad says there's something in the Bible about not taking radios on holiday but I don't believe him.'

Daniel got the flap undone and hid the radio inside.

'They've gone up to the road. They want to know if the crossing is open. I told them there isn't a chance. It's been raining all night. You only have to look at how the river has risen.'

He tapped David on the shoulder.

'That's good. Isn't it, mate? We won't be able to get back to school.'

David nodded.

'Of course,' Daniel put on a big smile, 'my dad won't be so pleased. He's the school principal. People will wonder if we don't get back on time.'

The boy jumped down from the van and hurried off saying he was going to look for some crocodiles he had seen earlier. David lay on his side, one eye covered by a damp towel, the other wandering over the interior of the van. It alighted on the rear light compartment.

He pulled himself up, lent on his arm and retrieved Daniel's radio. Most channels were broadcasting commercials or news reports. He flipped through them and heard his name.

"Paget was last seen drifting away from the scene of Officer Milkovitz's death. Attempts to locate him have been hampered by torrential rain. Paget has a history of violence and members of the public are warned not to approach him but to contact the police immediately in the event of a suspected sighting. Officer O'Neill described how he and Officer Milkovitz had been undertaking a surveillance operation following information that Price and Paget had gone to the reef to collect scuba tanks packed with cocaine ..."

David was aghast. Nothing made sense. Tim had been killed by a psychopath. Now they were saying he'd killed a policeman. People were being told to avoid him. He jumped from the van and ran to the river. The radio continued to chatter. He swung it on its strap and hurled it into the raging waters.

Chapter 18

Curtin Girls.

Kirstin dashed into the house. 'Humphrey. The Curtain Girls ... I know who they are.' Humphrey walked into the hallway and peered over his spectacles. His mother was flushed, short of breath and clasping a bundle of papers.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Humphrey. David told us about them ... in Doris' flat in Hong Kong. You must remember. Doris said that she and Rosie were Curt'n Girls.' She imitated the voice David used when describing the incident. 'We assumed she'd said Curtain Girls. We thought they were part of a striptease act.'

Humphrey removed his spectacles.

'So? What do you think Doris said?'

'I'm sure she said Curtin Girls. They were named after John Curtin, the wartime prime minister.'

A grin developed on Humphrey's face. 'You've been researching the war years and you've found a bunch of tarts who were named after the prime minister. What do you think he was ... some sort of pimp?'

'Well. Yes. I suppose you could put it like that.' Kirstin smiled. 'There were people who saw it like that.'

'What do you mean?'

'You have to think back to the war years.'

Humphrey did his best but his childhood memories were of Abba and the Beatles. He listened as Kirstin continued.

'The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and America had entered the war. All of a sudden American servicemen began to arrive in North Queensland. There were tens of thousands of them and they were sent to towns from which the women and children had been evacuated.'

'That would have created a bit of a problem,' Humphrey grinned.

'It did, Humphrey. And Prime Minister Curtin, being a practical man, solved it in a practical way.'

'He set up brothels?'

'Not quite. He was more subtle than that. He placed an advertisement in the southern newspapers. It announced that a train would leave Melbourne Central Station, at a certain time on a certain date, and any female who wished to board it would be transported to North Queensland free of charge. The train came to be called the Curtin Express and girls who travelled on it were called Curtin Girls.'

* * * * *

Janet Pulnitz entered the pizza parlour and hunted amongst the sea of young faces. It wasn't her scene but she had good reason for being there. She wore her femme fatale gear: tailored slacks, elegantly cut jacket, blouse, scarf and shoes to match. The slacks accentuated her long legs and the blouse was revealing. A low fitting bra added a final touch, pushing up her pendulous breasts so that they bulged out seductively. She had purchased the outfit on a trip to Rome but, when she wore it, she preferred to affect a French rather than an Italian accent, finding it more sexy and alluring.

In the corner, some boys were sipping Coca-Cola and munching their way through a large marinara. She sidled towards them, amused by their goggle-eyed reaction.

'Ah. Clarence.'

She gave an exaggerated rendering of his name.

'Cherie.'

Clarence Dubois' parents came from France and his French accent was more convincing than Janet's. He had been recruited into the police, straight from school, and assigned to Officer Pulnitz as a trainee police cadet. Her instruction, which covered a range of subjects, had resulted in charges of sexual harassment ... changed to inappropriate conduct when Clarence failed to cooperate with the disciplinary body.

He kissed her hand and turned to his companions.

'This is my friend, Janet.'

She shook the hand of a spotty-faced adolescent.

‘What is your name, darling?’

The boy stared into his pizza.

‘Br ... Bruce.’

The boy beside him was nearer Clarence’s age. Janet lent forward, allowing her blouse to hang open. He was taller than Clarence and more athletic. She ran her hand up his arm and asked his name.

‘Davin.’

She kissed Davin and watched him blush.

The other boys failed to interest her. She shook their hands before returning her attention to Clarence.

‘It is time for your lesson.’

The boys exchanged glances.

‘Lesson three, Clarence.’

‘Ah. Oui, Cherie.’ Clarence picked up his jacket and they walked outside, followed by the incredulous stares of the boys. He took her arm.

‘What will you teach me in lesson three, my darling?’

‘Technique, Clarence. You have the physique for a more varied approach. I want to see you put it into practice.’

‘See?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you mean feel?’

Janet smiled.

‘You’re learning, Clarence.’

* * * * *

The alarm clock rang and Clarence was awakened from a deep and contented sleep. He reached for his jacket and removed a packet of cigarettes. Janet watched from the corner of one eye. Her immediate thought was to warn him of the dangers of smoking ... particularly in bed. Instead, she pulled a photograph from her handbag.

‘Cherie,’ she affected her French, secret agent voice, ‘ave you ever come across an ugly bastard like this?’

Clarence reached out a hand.

‘Let me see the ugly bastard.’

‘He’s the long-haired man looking over Tim’s shoulder,’ Janet explained. ‘It was taken in the pub at Narooma.’

Clarence held the print at arm’s length and tilted it from side to side.

‘He is wearing a wig.’

‘I can see that,’ she nibbled his ear. ‘I’ve seen him on one of the mug shots at work. Perhaps you could do a search for me.’

‘I don’t have access to the mug shots.’

‘Well find someone who does and get them to do it.’

Clarence pulled a face.

‘If I do that I’ll soon be without a job ... just like you.’

‘I thought you were my friend.’

‘I am but I’m not going to ask around at work.’

Janet pivoted on her elbow and locked him in a karate grip. The pain was excruciating. Clarence struggled and the agony increased.

He gasped for breath.

'I don't need to ask ... I know.'

'What was that?'

She relaxed her grip and waited for him to regain colour.

'Did you say something?'

'He's called Footsie.'

The French secret agent voice had gone and he sounded like an Australian schoolboy again.

'How do you know?' Janet sat up but maintained a tight hold.

Clarence eyed her cautiously. 'I did a courier job for O'Neill. I was told to deliver a package to Barry Waters. The rendezvous was Woden bus station. When I got there Barry was with this guy, Footsie.'

'How do you know he was called Footsie?'

'He introduced himself. He's an even bigger psycho than Barry. He's got a thumb missing and the letters life and death tattooed on his knuckles ... real crude ... like how they do it in prison.'

Janet released her grip.

'I think I know who you're talking about, Clarence.'

'I gave Barry the package and he handed it straight to Footsie. Then, Footsie gave me an envelope.'

'That's round the wrong way.' Janet pulled him towards her. 'When I was a courier I used to collect packages from informants and hand over envelopes with money in them.'

'I don't think there was money in the envelope I got from Footsie. I think there were photographs. Right sort of size ... right sort of feel.'

'What do you think was in the package you handed to Footsie?'

'Papers but no powder or leaf ... nothing like that.'

'When did this happen?'

Clarence thought for a while.

'The day after Australia Day. I'd just got back from Melbourne.'

Janet contemplated the new information. Australia Day was when they'd gone to Narooma, the day they'd encountered Footsie in the pub.

Clarence interrupted her train of thought.

'Barry Waters arrived in town about a month ago. He spends a lot of time in the Empire, drinking with the local crims.'

Janet got out of bed and started to put on her clothes. She chose her business lady attire: neatly cut skirt and dark jacket with complementary blouse.

'Ave I been of assistance, my darling?'

Clarence assumed his French accent but Janet wasn't listening.

* * * * *

The phone rang on Kirstin's desk in the university library, where she worked as a volunteer. The work kept her active. Australia has a system where people of old but robust years can give their skills to the wider community and not expect to be paid. She picked up the phone and heard the receptionist.

'I have a Ms Manning here. She would like you to do some translating.'

Kirstin often did translating jobs: mainly Chinese but sometimes Danish. She said she would meet Ms Manning in the entrance hall and took the stairs to the

ground floor. The young woman waiting for her was dressed in the sharp-cut attire fashionable in business circles and somewhat alien to Kirstin's generation. She wore tinted glasses and spoke with a North American accent.

'Mrs Hansen, a mutual friend suggested that I contact you.'

A manicured hand tendered a business card.

Kirstin took the card and affected a strong Danish accent. 'Janice Manning ... you wouldn't be one of the Pulnitz-Mannings, by any chance?'

Janet removed her spectacles.

'How did you guess?'

'I smelt you.'

'Don't joke, Kirstin. We're fellow professionals. I want to know how you recognized me.'

'Well, my dear.' Kirstin smiled. 'If I hadn't previously met you, I probably wouldn't have suspected that you weren't who you claimed to be.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'You're good,' Kirstin said. 'When I was your age I used to dress up too. My favourite character was Natasha ... a mysterious White Russian refugee.'

She led Janet to a table and they sat down.

'I thought all Russians were white,' Janet said.

'White as opposed to Red. The Reds were the Bolsheviks.' Kirstin tapped Janet's arm. 'By the way, you're not to mention any of this to Humphrey. He simply wouldn't understand.'

'You mean he doesn't know what mummy did when he was a little boy?'

'He doesn't want to know,' Kirstin smiled.

'My mother's the same,' said Janet. 'She tells everyone I'm a probation officer. That doesn't faze her out like the narcotics thing.'

Kirstin handed back the business card. 'I assume this is not a social visit.'

'No. It's time to coordinate our activities.'

Janet told Kirstin about Clarence and the valuable information he had provided. She figured that Barry Waters was the weak link in the enemy's chain and said she planned to trail him. Kirstin told her about the Curtin Girls and the important role they played in the war effort. She said she intended to send Humphrey to Townsville.

'Why Townsville?'

'Because it was the major base in the early stages of the war against the Japanese. There were tens of thousands of military personnel stationed there.'

Janet was impressed. 'All those young guys. What an opportunity.'

Kirstin nodded. 'Fortunes were made serving their needs.'

'Do you think Doris worked in Townsville?'

'I'm sure.' Kirstin adjusted her spectacles. 'I've a friend. Emeritus Professor Louise Spencer. I knew her when she was at the university here. She's into oral history.'

'Oral what?'

'History, my dear. Oral refers to the mouth and is used in more ways than one.'

Janet looked surprised.

'Oral history is spoken history,' Kirstin explained. 'There has been a growing realization that too much of what we know of the past is based on written records and too little on the spoken word.'

'Okay.' Janet considered the point. 'How do you interview Julius Caesar if you think the books got it wrong?'

'You don't. You interview elderly people and get them to speak about things which happened when they were young ... the sort of things that didn't get recorded on paper.'

Kirstin paused to let the point sink in.

'I like it,' Janet said. 'This oral history thing. It's like what we do.'

'Exactly. A good oral historian is like a good detective.'

'The official term is investigatory officer,' Janet corrected her.

'I don't care what Cecil Sparrow calls us,' Kirstin said. 'We are detectives.'

Janet smiled. 'How does Humphles fit in?'

'He goes on an oral history assignment.'

'What's his brief?'

'We have identified the building where Doris worked. It's the Island View Hotel. The windows have a very distinctive shape and Louise had no difficulty recognizing it.'

'How?' Janet asked.

'From those blackmail prints.'

'You mean you sent her copies?'

'After Humphrey had cropped them on the computer. He removed the bits that could cause offence and emailed them to her.'

They discussed their future course of action and agreed on procedures for the exchange of information. Finally, Janet rose and assumed her intense business lady identity.

'This has been a most profitable encounter, Mrs Hansen.' She shook Kirstin's hand vigorously. 'I am most sincerely appreciative of the invaluable assistances you have provided for me.'

Kirstin watched Janet leave. There were things they had in common and a lot that was different. She was reminded of the character, Natasha, which she had played in the bars of the Commonwealth Hotel and other 1960s nightspots. It was a very artificial character. That was its attraction. There were lots of strange Eastern European girls desperately trying to forge new identities. Natasha was an easy character to impersonate because she was so unreal.

Charlie Paget had asked 'Why Natasha?'

Twenty-four-year-old Kirstin said she'd chosen Natasha because Natasha excited men's fantasies and got them talking. Charlie said that Scandinavian girls were meant to be exciting. Why was she pretending to be something different? Kirstin had never been able to give a satisfactory answer to that question.

Chapter 19

Mug shot.

Samantha Fischer left her apartment. It was 8am on a bright Canberra morning and she was on her way to work, smartly dressed in the uniform of an officer of the Australian Federal Police. She walked to the covered carport, which she shared with other tenants, and was surprised to see a familiar figure. Janet Pulnitz was sitting under a tree. She was wearing her motorcycle gear and appeared to be suffering from lack of sleep.

Samantha guessed her friend was working on a case for the Narcotics Bureau and wondered who was under observation. She knew Janet from their police academy days. Wild, crazy Janet had become an undercover agent, exposing herself to the dangers of the drug scene. Samantha's inclinations had steered her to more mundane activities. She worked for the Canberra police and her main duties were in the areas of domestic violence and child protection.

'Hi, Sam.' Janet stood up.

Samantha didn't expect to be greeted in this way. Undercover agents usually steer clear of police officers, particularly when they are in uniform.

'Have you read those newspaper reports on Tim Price and Dave Paget?'

Samantha nodded.

'Those boys were set up!' Janet spat out the words. 'I don't believe what that prick O'Neill said. And I don't believe what bloody Harald said either ... David's not violent.'

Samantha fumbled for her car keys. She knew where they were but was in no hurry to find them. She needed time to think. After a few moments she spoke. 'One of our trainees went to school with David. He described him as mild-mannered and honest.'

Janet rose to the bait.

'You mean he doesn't believe any of it?'

'He doubted that David was involved in drugs.'

'I want to find out what happened.' Janet clenched her fists. 'Some bastard used those boys ... and I'm going to track him down.'

Samantha unlocked her car and was about to get in when Janet produced a photograph. 'I want to know who this bastard is. I've seen his ugly mug on one of the files. If I had access to them, I'd have him in no time but I don't. Cecil Sparrow got rid of me. He knew I was finding out too much.'

Samantha examined the photograph.

'It's not just that I want to find out how Tim died.' Janet continued to pour out venom. 'There's Dave out there. There's a manhunt going on for him. He's a good kid. We need to clear his name. This bastard's got something to do with it ... and so has Rodney O'Neill.'

Warning bells rang in Samantha's ears. Being too close to Janet Pulnitz was dangerous. But Janet was a friend and she felt committed to her. With growing unease, she slipped the photograph into her bag.

* * * * *

Police chief Endicott parked his car and removed a briefcase from the back seat. A tall man in his late fifties, Bill Endicott was affectionately known as the 'Owl' by

his staff on account of his horn-rimmed spectacles, domed forehead and passion for bird watching. He was about to walk to his office when he saw a member of his staff. She had a worried expression and his natural inclination was to inquire why.

‘Good morning, Samantha.’

‘Good morning, Sir.’

‘You are looking very thoughtful today, Samantha.’

‘Yes, Sir. I’ve just had an encounter with a former member of the Narcotics Bureau. It is a matter I should perhaps refer to Senior Sergeant Barnes in the first instance. It concerns the incident on the Great Barrier Reef.’

Samantha was correct. Junior officers were required to report to their immediate superiors and not leapfrog over their heads. Bill Endicott was about to agree when she continued.

‘The person who approached me had some disturbing things to say about what might have happened when Agent Milkovitz was killed.’

She chose her words carefully and he listened carefully, stopping beside a tree as if to admire the blossoms.

‘What did this person have to say?’

Samantha gave an account of her meeting with Janet. Bill Endicott was acquainted with Ms Pulnitz. He had even considered taking her onto his staff but had rejected the proposition as being far too hazardous. Samantha told him about Janet’s belief in the innocence of Tim and David and her frequent tirades against Cecil Sparrow and the Narcotics Bureau. Finally, she produced the photograph Janet had given her.

He examined the photograph and slipped it in his pocket.

‘You cannot, of course, agree to Ms Pulnitz’s request.’

‘No, Sir.’

‘You were quite right in referring the matter to me.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘The matter is sensitive and I think it best that you report any future developments direct to me and not raise them with anyone else.’

‘Understood, Sir.’

Chapter 20

Trauma.

Mary Longboat examined the strange young man who had arrived so unexpectedly in their midst. He was in a state of exhaustion when they found him naked and muttering incoherently about a diving accident.

She had removed his contact lenses and treated his many jellyfish stings. For good measure, she had given him a shot of penicillin and started him on a course of antibiotics.

He was an immensely fit young man and she had no fears for his physical wellbeing. It was his mental state that worried her. David was clearly in a state of

shock. It was the sort of thing she had witnessed in road accident victims in the casualty ward of the hospital in Townsville where she worked.

The standard procedure was to refer them to a counsellor but that was not an option in this case. Instead, she had asked Rebecca to talk to him and try to find out the cause of his traumas. So far her daughter had made little progress.

Chapter 21

Rosie.

It was dark by the time Humphrey arrived in Townsville. A light breeze was blowing and the air was pleasantly warm and dry. He collected his bag from the airport carousel and made for the toilets where he set about changing into a new set of clothes. Kirstin's contact, the retired historian, Professor Louise Spencer, had identified the Island View Hotel as the place where fifteen-year-old Doris and her older companion had entertained the colonel and others during the war.

Louise was seventy-five but still active. She had warned Kirstin that the Island View had fallen into disrepair and was now little more than a boarding house for old men. By good luck, a few rooms were reserved for overnight stays by cattlemen from the grazing lands to the west. Aware that her cultured tones would be unlikely to secure a room for Humphrey, she had asked an acquaintance, a gravelly voiced cattle farmer, to telephone the hotel and make a reservation.

Humphrey emerged from a toilet cubicle and went over to the mirrors in the washroom. He had changed into denims, chequered shirt, wide-brimmed hat and riding boots. He examined the pallid face that stared at him from beneath the oversized hat and ran his eyes towards his bulging stomach and podgy hands. The overall effect was far from convincing. He tried saying 'G'day. My name's Humph Hansen. My mate, Bill Maxwell, phoned yous about me ...'

A small boy attempting to master a urinal that was far too high for him eyed Humphrey suspiciously.

'G'day. My name's Humph Hansen.'

He tried again and the boy zipped up his fly and left hurriedly.

'G'day ...'

Humphrey gave up. The attempt to impersonate a cowboy was stupid. He went back to the cubicle and tried to put together a more convincing costume. The result was an eccentric mix of garments that didn't belong anywhere.

* * * * *

The Island View Hotel was fifteen minutes' drive from the airport. Humphrey didn't want to look too affluent and was keen to give the impression that he was on foot. He got the taxi to put him down a short distance away but needn't have bothered. Another taxi was stopped outside the hotel and two men with beer bellies were unloading booze. He followed them inside and looked around. What had once been a reception hall was now a lounge. It smelt of stale beer and

cigarettes. Half-a-dozen elderly men were slumped in armchairs, watching horseracing on an ancient television set.

'G'day.'

Humphrey peered at them through a pall of cigarette smoke.

'My name's Humph Hansen. There's a room reserved for me.'

A solitary face turned in his direction.

'Dunno about that. Yer better go upstairs and ask Clary.'

Humphrey picked up his suitcase and made for the stairway. There was a corridor at the top and a room with an open door. He peered inside. The bedspread and carpet were none too clean but that did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm. The room was as pictured in the photographs. Same windows and same moulded architrave.

He went inside and looked around.

The wallpaper was ancient and falling apart. The top layer was covered in parrots and the one below had flowers. He tugged at it and another layer came into view. It was like an archaeological dig ... peeling back the past. He reached the fourth layer and Sydney Harbor Bridge emerged. His pulse raced. The wallpaper was the same as in the wartime photographs of underage Doris and her middle-aged customers. He gave another tug and heard a voice.

'What d'yer think yer doing?'

He turned and found a shrivelled little man staring at him. He wore a dirty apron and held a broom.

'My name's Humph Hansen. Bill Maxwell phoned about me.'

'I didn't ask for yer name. I asked what yer was doing.'

'I enquired downstairs and they said I'd find my room up here. I hope I've not inconvenienced you in any way.'

'Yer've just damaged that wall. That'll cost heaps ...'

Humphrey took a ten-dollar note from his wallet and thrust it into Clary's hand. The little man pocketed the money and was about to leave when Humphrey produced a photograph of Doris and her co-worker, censored to obscure the full nature of what they were doing.

'I'm told this was a popular place with the Americans during the war.' He handed the print to Clary. 'I'm writing a book on the war years. I'm interested in the Island View and the girls who worked here.'

Clary examined the print.

'What's the matter with 'em? Don't they 'ave any clothes on?'

'The photo has been trimmed a little,' Humphrey replied with a twinkle in his eye.

'It's been what?'

'It's had the bottom cut off so you can't see what they're doing.'

'Oh ...'

Clary stuck his head forward and took another look. He was about seventy. Humphrey guessed he would have been too young to have had any involvement in what went on in the Island View in Doris' days.

'Perhaps you might know someone who was here during the war ... someone who might recognize the two young ladies.'

Clary slipped his hand in his pocket and crinkled the banknote Humphrey had just given him.

'Yeah ... I might.'

'I'll pay.'

Clary considered the proposition.

'All right. I'll see what I can do.'

He went downstairs and banged on a door. There was a brief silence followed by female voices. Humphrey peered over the balcony into the hall below. Clary was speaking to three elderly women. Two frail old ladies with sunken eyes and a huge woman with a bandaged leg. They looked well into their eighties ... the sort of age the Curtin Girls would be if they were still around.

Clary left and Humphrey went downstairs.

'Good evening.'

He smiled benevolently and raised his hat.

'I believe Clary has just shown you a picture of some young ladies. I have a better one here.'

He produced a laser print showing the faces of Doris and her companion, computer-enhanced to remove blemishes on the original photograph. The three women looked at it but said nothing.

'A friend of theirs ... a former American serviceman ... wants to get in touch with them. I understand he's very well off.'

There was still no response and he decided that all three were in an advanced state of mental decline.

'He's got lots of money,' he shouted.

This time he got a reaction. The biggest of the three picked up her walking frame and lunged towards him.

'What are you snooping around here for?'

'I'm working for a solicitor. I'm trying to locate certain persons who are beneficiaries of a will.'

'That's not what you told Clary.'

Humphrey was thrown on the defensive. Two of the old dears might be gaga but this one definitely wasn't.

'I'm also writing a book. I'm combining the two.'

'Who sent you here?'

'I've told you.'

'You liar!'

She pushed herself up to her full height. 'Piss off! Go back to where you've come from and stop poking your nose into other people's business ... or you'll soon find out what's coming to you.'

* * * * *

Professor Louise Spencer's gravelly-voiced friend had a farm near Charters Towers, an old gold-mining town about an hour's drive from Townsville. Louise said he knew a lot about the Island View Hotel and had no inhibitions when talking about the place.

Humphrey reached Charters Towers just before midday. It reminded him of old cowboy movies: wooden buildings, gold exchange and hotels with verandas. He pulled up outside one and squeezed his rental car between two farm trucks.

A hitching rail stood nearby. Two men in their forties were tying their mounts to it. Humphrey didn't know much about horses or knots but knew immediately that the pair weren't for real. They were dressed like cattlemen but didn't look the part. They were too well scrubbed. Their pallid skins and slack expressions didn't belong. They were office workers playing at being cowboys. Humphrey had seen advertisements in the Sunday newspapers for bush holidays with horse and gear provided. He guessed the men had answered one and cursed himself for even thinking he could imitate a cattleman. It would take years in the saddle, riding back and forth over the sun-drenched land, before anyone could put on a convincing performance.

He turned off the air conditioning, stopped the engine and stepped out into the searing heat. The bar was only ten yards away but he was sweating before he got there. The heat was unbelievable. His only consolation was that the air was drier than on the coast.

He reached the bar door and stood beneath the fan that whirled overhead. Sunburnt faces looked out from beneath broad-brimmed hats. The scene was totally different from Canberra. There were no suits, ties or shoes. The order of the day was bush shirts, denims and elastic-sided boots. It was like being in a foreign country. Humphrey ran his eyes from table to table. Which of the tough-looking men was Bill Maxwell? He was about to go to the bar and ask when a hand tapped his shoulder.

'Professor Hansen?'

A tall, lanky figure stood beside him. They exchanged greetings and Humphrey was led to a small table where a second man was sitting. He rose and stretched out a hand.

'Tom O'Brien...'

Humphrey had difficulty putting an age to the two men. Both were lean and leathery. They could be almost any age from fifty to seventy-five. When they stood they had the appearance of men who spent long hours in the saddle. Bill got some beers and the conversation turned to oral history.

'We'd been doing a bit of it ourselves,' Bill explained. 'We were getting the old folks to speak into tape recorders. Then we found that the university had a similar project.'

Humphrey was pleased that they had mistaken him for a Canberra academic. He reached in a folder and produced a photograph of Doris and her companion, with enough showing to leave no doubts as to the nature of their employment.

He pushed it in Tom's direction.

'I've something which might interest you.'

Tom examined the print then handed it to Bill.

'There you are, mate. That should bring back a few fond memories.'

Bill's face lit up. 'Rosie's place.'

'That's right. They used to call her Chinese Rose.'

'No, mate ... Gipsy Rose.'

Tom turned to Humphrey. 'Don't listen to that old bastard. He was just a customer there. I was in the police ... I used to raid the place.'

They both laughed.

'Some of the local wowsers wanted to shut Rosie down,' Tom continued. 'While the war was on, the pollies wouldn't listen to 'em. They knew Rosie was doing an important job. But, afterwards, it was different. There was votes to be had by taking a high moral stand ... ain't that right, mate?' He dug Bill in the ribs.

Humphrey removed another print from his folder. 'Do you recognize either of the girls? One of them was an albino.'

Tom pushed the photograph to Bill.

'There you are. That should cast your mind back a bit. Big tits and blue eyes.'

'Pink eyes,' Bill interjected.

'What was that?'

'She had pink eyes like a white mouse.'

'Are you sure?'

Bill stroked his chin.

'Yeah ...'

'So. You were having it off with a minor?'

'Mate, I was the minor. It was in the fifties. She would have been about twenty-five by then.'

'It was a serious offence, having it off with minors,' Tom reflected. 'You could go to jail for having sex with an underage girl. You still can for that matter.'

He took another look at the photograph.

'She couldn't have been more than fourteen ... fifteen at the most.'

'That would have been in 1942,' Humphrey observed.

Tom looked thoughtful. 'In the fifties, Rosie still had a few underage girls working for her.'

'That was a bit unwise,' Humphrey remarked. 'I mean ... considering that the authorities were meant to be cracking down on prostitution.'

'Not unwise if you can pressure the people who are doing the cracking down.'

'You mean by blackmailing them?'

'Too right.'

'Are you sure?'

'What do you think? Prostitution was illegal. Having sex with minors was doubly illegal. But Rosie stayed in business despite the wowsers.'

Humphrey picked up the glasses and went to the bar for another round. He felt pleased. Things were falling into place. When he got back the two men were talking about Rosie.

'We were saying how she set up one of the biggest transport companies in the north,' Tom said. 'She laid her hands on a whole lot of American army trucks. One rumour had it they were going to be destroyed after the war but somehow Rosie picked 'em up cheap. After that, she laid her hands on a whole lot of demountable buildings and set them up as trucking stops with restaurants, bars and girls.'

'What became of Rosie?'

'Dunno.' Tom shook his head. 'You heard a lot about her but you never saw her.'

'What did she look like?'

'Dunno.'

'I remember a photo of her.' Bill took a sip of beer. 'She was giving money to a hospital fund. She got very political. You saw her in the newspapers with state premiers and people like that.'

'Yeah.' Tom nodded thoughtfully. 'She was trying to improve her image ... become respectable. She married. She wasn't Rosie anymore. She became Mrs Rosalind Miller ... or was it Marshall?'

He thought for a while then came up with another name.

'She was Mrs Rosalind Maxwell.'

'No, mate.' Bill put down his glass. 'That's my name. I didn't bloody marry her.'

'Well. It was a name like that.'

'It's important I find out,' Humphrey said. 'Do you think we should make a search of the marriage registers?'

Bill shook his head. 'She probably never got married ... just changed her name. Better idea would be to look at vehicle registrations. You could run a brothel without a license but they'd soon shut you down if you tried to run a trucking company with unlicensed vehicles.'

* * * * *

If he hadn't been in such a hurry, Humphrey might have noticed that his suitcase wasn't packed as he had left it. He plucked out his underclothes, which were neatly folded on top, forgetting he had stuffed them down the side. He failed to remember that his shirt had been packed at the bottom and not in the middle. More seriously, he failed to notice that his address book was missing.

He descended the steps of the Island View Hotel, freshly showered, freshly clothed and in good spirits. An American warship was in port and US servicemen were fraternizing with Australian soldiers based in the city. It was a chance too good to be missed: a return to something like the atmosphere of the war years. Down the road, a band was playing Glenn Miller hits from the 1940s. Humphrey's feet began to move to the beat of Colonel Bogie as he headed towards the sound of drum and trombone. Three elderly faces watched him go ... peering from behind dirty lace curtains.

The boys in the band wore T-shirts emblazoned with American and Australian flags. Humphrey found himself a small table in the garden. He ordered a beer and a plate of French fries. He knew he looked out of place but derived a sense of detachment from his broad-brimmed hat, white linen jacket and sunglasses.

The fries were particularly good and he demolished the entire plate before starting on his beer. After a few sips, he became aware of a presence.

'Do you mind if I join you?'

She was young and sank into the chair beside him.

'You don't mind, do you?'

Humphrey looked up from his beer.

'Some older men feel shy in the presence of younger women.'

Humphrey assured her he was not one of them.

She placed a hand on his knee.

'Looking for company?'

'I'm listening to the band.'

'That's a laugh. Don't you want a bit of female companionship?'

'Not tonight, thank you.'

'What's the matter? Are you gay?'

'I've a sixteen-year-old daughter.'

'I think you're gay. That's why you've got a handbag.'

'It's not a handbag ... it's a camera case.'

She slid her hand up his thigh.

A short distance away, a man in a white shirt and dark trousers was watching from the shadows. He signalled to one of the bouncers.

'What's happening over there, Sean?'

'You mean the clown with the bush hat and shades?'

'Yes. What's he up to?'

Sean shrugged. 'Some priest or polly who doesn't want to be recognised ... out for a bit of fun.'

'That's not how I read it. The older man pulled out a phone. 'What's a young tart doing, chatting up someone like him? There's hundreds of young guys out there with dollar bills hanging out of their pockets. It doesn't make sense ... it's a put-up job.'

He started to press up a number.

'It's those new soliciting laws. We're meant to keep the tarts out. That fellow's a licensing inspector. The silly bastards think they have to wear fancy dress when they go out on a job. You get Liz. I'm phoning the police. I want that girl charged. I'll teach the sods a lesson.'

Back in the beer garden, Humphrey was attempting to extricate himself from the girl's clutches. He tried to rise and found himself trapped between her and a prickly bush. At a neighbouring table, a group of young people was amused by his predicament. They clapped when he tried to ward off the girl and cheered when a female bouncer came to his rescue.

'Is this person bothering you, Sir?'

Humphrey nodded.

'Okay ... Up!' She pulled the girl to her feet.

'Don't you touch me.' The girl lashed out. 'I know my rights.'

A scuffle followed and Humphrey took the opportunity to break loose. He made for the door and was about to leave when a man in a white shirt tried to stop him.

'The police will want you to make a statement.'

Humphrey pushed past. He had no desire to speak to the police or anyone like them. As someone who had recently been sacked from a law enforcement agency, he felt vulnerable to official scrutiny.

Back on the street he removed his hat and sunglasses. They weren't needed and he felt conspicuous in them. The sensible thing was to lie low and let the hubbub die down. A nearby park beckoned. He made his way to it and soon forgot about the police and the girl.

It was peaceful and the wildlife was spectacular. Canberra prided itself on its harmony with the natural environment. Townsville had gone one step further. The creatures of the great outdoors had taken over. They flew overhead, perched in trees and scampered at his feet.

Humphrey was entranced. He'd always wanted to be a biologist but his mother said there was no money in furry things and he'd ended up learning Chinese. A moon moth settled on a lamppost. He had raised these magnificent insects from eggs. Kirstin had indulged his childish fascination for bugs and allowed him to purchase the eggs from a supplier in Queensland. They arrived by post and the resulting caterpillars were fed on leaves that she helped him collect from the botanical gardens when the staff weren't looking.

The moth flew off and he turned his attention to the brilliantly coloured birds flocking into the park in search of a place to spend the night. They were rainbow lorikeets. His daughter, Elizabeth, had a picture of them on her bedroom wall. Hundreds of the squawking, argumentative creatures were descending on the palm trees and dislodging the earlier arrivals.

Fronds sagged under their weight and birds tumbled to the ground. Humphrey wondered why the trees were so highly prized. It was the sort of biological puzzle that intrigued him. Was it because they were near street lamps? Could it be that lorikeets are scared of the dark? He was pondering the question when a different sort of flying fauna forced its attention upon him.

A pair of giant fruit bats was contesting ownership of a mango in a nearby tree. Elizabeth knew a boy who kept one in a cage. The silky skinned rodent was said to make an excellent pet so long as you wore stout gloves when handling it and sought immediate medical assistance if scratched or bitten.

Humphrey figured that earmuffs might also be needed, judging by the din. The squawks and screams finally ended when one of the contestants conceded defeat and flew off, discharging the contents of its bowels on the way. The slimy green liquid splashed down and Humphrey was reminded of a warning on the Internet.

Bat poo can eat into the bodywork of your car.

He decided to vacate the area and set off down a winding path leading to a miniature rainforest. The wildlife seemed less threatening there. Vines dangled from trees and furry things moved in the undergrowth. Humphrey was reminded of school camps. You slept in tents and park rangers with spotlights told you about the animals that lived in the forest. He saw eyes shining in the dark and guessed they were possums. Then something far bigger attracted his attention.

It looked like a crouching figure but he couldn't be sure. There were so many oddly shaped things casting strange shadows in the moonlight. He crouched and the figure became a rock. A step forward and it vanished altogether. An expert on jungle warfare had once told him that two equally matched platoons could expect to lose half their number in an hour of fighting. Humphrey wasn't surprised. Anyone fighting in these conditions stood as much chance of being killed by their own side as by the enemy.

He glanced down the path and saw the figure again. This time it was slinking away and looked very real. He'd warned his daughter about parks. Undesirable people hung around them. He'd told Elizabeth that she must under no circumstances go into one after dark and wondered why he'd not taken his own advice. The police had almost certainly lost interest in him, if they'd ever been interested. The sensible thing was to end the nature walk and head back to the bright lights. He left the trees and entered an area illuminated by lamps.

There was a bandstand and it looked familiar. Visions of women in long dresses and children in sailor suits flooded back. Humphrey examined the elegant roof and cast-iron pillars and felt certain he could make a positive identification. There seemed little doubt that the bandstand featured in the sepia prints of Tong Yee and his family, dressed in their Sunday best, posing for photographs as a military band played in regimental uniforms.

It was all rather exciting. In the space of two days, he'd met the last of the Curtin Girls and spoken to some old fellows who had frequented the Island View when Doris and Rosie were running a profitable business there. Now, he was standing on the very spot where Tong Yee's photographs had been taken all those many years ago. He looked around to see if there was anything else he could recognize from the past.

A statue caught his eye and he wondered why he'd not seen it before. It was in appallingly bad taste. A veritable monstrosity with as much charm as a garden gnome on a bollard. He moved closer and decided that it looked more like a badly dressed Santa Claus.

Suddenly, the statue spoke.

'Hullo, little boy.'

He guessed it was some sort of animated voice, activated by his movement. Why it was still operating, so long after Christmas, was a bit of a mystery.

'What do you want from Santa, little boy?'

The lips moved in a very lifelike manner.

A full-sized Father Christmas, with white beard and red coat, looked down at him. The coat fluttered in the breeze but the rest of the figure was motionless.

'Ho! Ho!'

Santa lent over, bending stiffly at the waist. An arm jerked out, mechanically, and a hand tweaked Humphrey's nose. 'Ho! Ho! We know what you don't want ... because we've just tried to give you one.'

Humphrey took a step backwards and was preparing to run when Santa's voice degenerated into maniacal laughter.

'You don't want a little girl!'

The red-coated figure leapt from the bollard, knocked him to the ground and sat on his chest. Humphrey struggled to catch his breath. His spectacles steamed up and he hardly saw the pair of secateurs thrust in his face.

'Oh! What a big nose you have!' Santa moved forward. 'And you do think you can poke it into other people's business ... don't you, my friend?'

He fastened the secateurs onto Humphrey's nostrils.

Humphrey did his best to cry out but the weight on his chest prevented him from making more than a feeble wheeze.

Santa smiled at him. 'Calm yourself, my friend, or you will spoil the last beautiful moments we shall share together.'

Humphrey's blood ran cold. The secateurs tightened.

'Which little piggy will it be?'

His left ear was tweaked.

'Shall we start with this little piggy?'

Santa's hand moved to the side and Humphrey saw that the thumb was missing.

‘Or, will it be this little piggy?’

One hand took hold of his right ear while the other tightened on the secateurs.

Humphrey saw the letters D-E-A-T-H tattooed on the knuckles and realized he was confronting Footsie.

‘Will it be this little piggy?’

His other ear was tweaked.

‘Something lower perhaps?’

The secateurs left Humphrey’s nose and moved slowly down his chest towards his groin. He struggled to hold them back.

‘Harder!’ Footsie shouted. ‘Harder! I’m getting there.’

Humphrey’s mind was ready to explode. His fly was unzipped.

‘I’m almost there.’

The secateurs probed.

‘You’ll soon know the exquisite agony of being parted from an old friend.’

Footsie’s face came closer. Humphrey saw the scars and broken nose. He expected to suffer the agony of emasculation and was summoning up his last reserve of energy when a body came crashing in from the side. It hit Footsie with a flying tackle and Humphrey rolled over gasping for breath. He recognized his rescuer as one of the bouncers in the beer garden. Footsie soon had him pinned to the ground.

‘You are an impertinent fellow.’

The secateurs were thrust at the young man.

‘You should not interfere in matters which do not concern you. Do you not read your bible, my friend?’

Humphrey got to his feet and hunted for a weapon. An empty beer bottle lay nearby. He picked it up, staggered back and brought it down on Footsie’s skull. The blow would have felled a normal human being but the effect on Footsie was minimal. The ugly man swayed a little and relaxed his hold sufficiently for the young man to break loose.

‘Run! Run!’

He grabbed Humphrey and ran with him towards the road. A police car was parked outside the beer garden. The young man dragged Humphrey towards it and shouted through the window.

‘This is him. He’s the one I told you about.’

Chapter 22

Rebecca.

Rebecca watched David from the door of her family’s big, compartmented tent. Her parents had their sleeping quarters and she shared hers with her little brother, Daniel. It was an arrangement that appealed to neither of them. She had placed a yellow flower in her hair. It came from a native hibiscus and suited her complexion. She knew Daniel would make fun of it but didn’t care. Her thoughts

were on David. The subtle colours enhanced her hair and jet-black skin. She had rubbed her face with moisturizing cream to make it glow. Her father had forbidden the use of makeup but he couldn't stop her using skin care products. Her mother had taken her side in that argument and they'd won.

Daniel was lolling in a hammock. Her little brother had once hero-worshipped David. He'd pulled him from the sea and helped him struggle onto land. Now he regarded David with suspicion. His former 'hero' was now a 'weirdo'.

Amongst other things, Daniel claimed that David had stolen his radio. Rebecca had little doubt the radio had been confiscated by her father who would lecture her brother on the evils of disobeying parental authority. Father was being particularly irksome. He was determined that she would remain a virgin for the rest of her life, never smoke, never drink and never wear makeup.

The monsoon rain poured down relentlessly. Rebecca found an umbrella and went over to David's makeshift shelter. When she got there, he was drawing spirals in the sand. She tried to engage him in conversation but got nowhere. He stared at the sand and continued to draw ... endless spirals that led nowhere.

Chapter 23

Tea for two.

Kirstin looked past Cecilia and surveyed the sculptured heads in the pool beside their table. They had spent the afternoon in the national art gallery and were having tea in a nearby restaurant. The outing had been Kirstin's idea. Cecilia was greatly distressed by David's disappearance and needed a sympathetic ear. Kirstin hoped she would learn something useful in the process.

A waitress brought a pot of jasmine tea and a plate of cucumber sandwiches. Kirstin was reminded of tea with the Pagets thirty years before. It had been an annual event when she worked in George Paget's special intelligence unit. In those far-off days, George's highly-strung wife, Philippa, used to pour the tea. Today it was his daughter. Kirstin watched Cecilia fuss over the teapot. She had not inherited her mother's mental instability but was every bit as nervous.

The scented tea was not to Kirstin's taste nor were the sandwiches. But the flow of information more than compensated. She learnt a lot about the Paget family and managed to steer the conversation round to the subject of Cecilia's brother, Charlie.

'Humphrey and I have wondered if Charlie might somehow be involved in David's disappearance,' she remarked casually. 'Do you think there could be any connection?'

Cecilia paled and her hands began to shake.

'David told us that Charlie and Sue Lynne had some sort of relationship,' Kirstin prompted. 'From our enquiries it would seem that he led an extremely eventful life.'

Cecilia reached for a napkin and wiped her eyes.

‘He always frightened me. Everyone said he was so clever and I was so stupid. That’s why they sent me away to school in England when mummy was so ill. They didn’t want people to meet their stupid little daughter.’

‘Cecilia.’ Kirstin took her hand. ‘We’ve got to think of David. Humphrey and I want to help. For a start, we don’t think that either David or Charles is dead.’

Cecilia’s face lit up.

‘I don’t either. I know the darling boy is alive.’

‘We need to know more about Charles,’ Kirstin said. ‘Was he ever involved in drugs?’

Cecilia took in a deep breath. ‘Charles was involved in drugs and guns.’

‘How do you know?’

Cecilia took a sip of tea. ‘I heard them talking ... Charles and daddy. He used to come and stay with us. He called it rest and recreation. That was before he fell out with daddy.’

‘Was that during the Vietnam War?’

‘No. It was that trouble with the Russians in Afghanistan. I remember because Charles was still working for the Americans then. One evening I heard them talking. They probably thought I wasn’t clever enough to understand.’

She took a small bite from a sandwich.

‘They used to speak in Russian or Chinese. It was their way of making people feel small.’

Kirstin nodded sympathetically.

‘This time they spoke in English. Charles told daddy about the guns they’d been giving to the Muhagees and daddy said it would have been cheaper to give drugs to the Russian soldiers ...’

Cecilia’s voice drifted away and Kirstin saw that she had taken a photograph from her bag.

‘Your father said it would have been cheaper to give drugs to the Russian soldiers,’ she prompted.

‘Yes. Then Charles said they’d done that and it wasn’t cheap at all. He said he’d handed over millions and millions of dollars buying drugs.’

‘Why do you think they fell out ... Charles and your father?’

‘I think Charles continued to deal in drugs after he’d left the Americans. I’m sure that’s what daddy thought.’

‘How did Charles get to know Sue Lynne?’

‘She was his daughter-in-law ... Harald’s wife.’ Cecilia became animated. ‘Harald treated Sue Lynne abominably and Charles took care of her. That’s the one good thing I have to say about my brother.’

Her eyes returned to the photograph.

‘Harald was a vicious, nasty child and he grew up into a vicious, nasty adult. I shall never forgive him for what he did to David. He lied about his injuries. He wasn’t hurt badly when he fell downstairs. Harald made it all up.’

Cecilia launched into a diatribe against Harald and Kirstin’s eyes strayed to the sculptured heads in the pool. They seemed to be telling her something.

Chapter 24

Rebecca tries again.

While Humphrey was in the pub in Charters Towers furthering his inquiries, Rebecca was sitting in the shade of a palm tree contemplating her next approach to David. She had managed to get in a few words with him the previous day but the conversation had been stilted. David asked questions about her but said very little about himself. For some reason he thought her family came from Africa. At first she couldn't work out why. Then she realized it was her appearance. Her folks came from the Torres Strait islands and had black skins and tightly curled hair like many Africans. She explained that the islands are part of Queensland and many of the islanders live in centres like Townsville and Cairns. David seemed interested but remained tight-lipped when it came to talking about his own family.

He had set up camp in a shelter that he had built and was feeding himself on fish and an assortment of roots and other bush food. As she watched, he came out and stared in her direction. She put down her book and wandered across trying to appear casual. Her mother was worried that David would make off in his disturbed state and try to live in the wilderness away from the stresses of the world. She knew of such a case, following a car accident, and it had ended in tragedy.

Rebecca reached his side and stood for a while before saying anything. When she did his reaction was mixed. David was clearly put out by her intrusion but pleased to have her company. Their conversation was strained and it was a while before she got it going. The topic was bush tucker.

David's knowledge of the foods of the Australian bush was surprising. He knew which plants were safe and he knew about their nutritional properties. Rebecca couldn't make him out. He seemed so vulnerable but the more they talked the more she was impressed by what he knew. David was clearly very competent and interested in everything that went on about him.

For a while he was almost relaxed. He asked about her grandparents in the Torres Straits and talked about his family in Canberra. She told him she was about to begin university there. Things were starting to look good. David asked what people ate in the Torres Straits and she asked how he knew so much about bush food.

Then the conversation went badly wrong. It seemed that he had learnt from a friend who had been in the army. As he talked, his expression became more rigid. Rebecca was horrified by the transformation and guessed David's trauma had something to do with the friend. His mind was tugging in opposite directions. One part wanted to retreat and the other wanted to speak about his problems.

**Press Cutting from The Bulletin Magazine,
dated 28 July 1959,
pasted to inside cover of Tom Lee's journal**

MR T.J. Lee, whose death was announced on 23rd July, will be remembered with affection by two generations of Australians. Born in 1871, in Shanghai, he founded the Tom Lee chain of grocery stores which catered for the needs of rural communities in Queensland and northern New South Wales.

Tom Lee became a household name in the depression years of the 1930s when his catch phrase 'You can count on Tom' became a byword for honesty and integrity.

He came to Australia in the 1890s and worked on the goldfields of Far North Queensland before turning his talents to market gardening. The horticultural skills which he knew from his native China proved to be particularly successful in the severe tropical climate of northern Australia.

The market garden business prospered and soon expanded into distribution and retailing. Within a few years he had built the grocery empire for which he became famous.

Thomas John Lee will be remembered not only as a businessman but also for his many charitable deeds. With his Scottish-born wife, Florence (nee McDonald), he was a generous supporter of the Queensland Hospital Service. The Lees lived modestly and the bulk of the proceeds from the sale of the Tom Lee Stores were donated to charity.

Mr Lee is survived by his son, Melbourne surgeon, Mr James Lee.

Chapter 25

Gipsy Rose Lee.

The mist billowed out over the pond and spread amongst the rushes. Kirstin watched it advance towards the sculptured heads that poked evocatively from the water. She had returned to the restaurant where she had sipped tea with Cecilia Paget a few days earlier and listened while Cecilia agonized over David's disappearance and revealed secrets about the Paget family.

A strange instinct had drawn her back. She'd met it in other cases and guessed it had something to do with the way the mind processes information. Clues gather in the subconscious and hover there like ghosts. The problem was to entice them out and make sense of them.

The heads were part of a display and the mist was generated artificially. They reminded her of the characters in Tom Lee's journal. Some stood out clearly. Others were seen through the mist that Tom used in order to hide them from others.

She had the journal with her and was thumbing through it, hoping for inspiration. She had read it from cover to cover over the past few days: a task made difficult by Tom's fascination with obscure Chinese characters and his use of shorthand notations when expressing himself in the English language.

His way of writing names presented problems. While he referred to his wife as Flo and his surgeon son as Jim, his other son (who died in a pub brawl) was represented by a character that Kirstin translated as Larrikin.

During the Second World War Tom had worked for the Australian Government. This brought him into contact with the Mandarin (a senior public servant?) who reported to the Emperor (prime minister?). His contact with the Mandarin was usually through the Knave (junior public servant?).

The Knave had some involvement with Magnolia Blossom, whom he recognized as a grandchild. Tom recorded a visit from the Larrikin's widow. She brought Magnolia Blossom with her and another child, Porcelain Doll, whom he regarded as the product of an extra-marital relationship.

He described Magnolia Blossom as an intelligent and lively teenager who bore all the signs of her Lee ancestry. But the praise ended there. The old man was clearly upset by the girl's behaviour, which he described as 'precocious' and 'disrespectful'.

The other girl was eight years younger, simple-minded and sickly. Tom recorded the nature of Porcelain Doll's illness using the English word 'albino'.

Kirstin looked out over the pond and saw that the mist had cleared. The heads were now clearly visible. In a flash, she realized that the Porcelain Doll was Doris and Magnolia Blossom was Rosie. She compared Tom Lee's photograph with that of the older girl in the blackmail prints ... and the family resemblance was unmistakable.

Humphrey had said that the men in the pub argued over whether Rosie was known as Chinese Rose or Gipsy Rose. Kirstin guessed she was called both: Chinese because of her narrow eyes and Gipsy after the wartime entertainer, Gipsy Rose Lee.

She flipped through the journal and came to an account of a 1943 meeting with the Knave. The old man was clearly upset by the encounter. He described the Knave as unscrupulous and referred to his liaison with Magnolia Blossom, saying he was exploiting it for his own ends.

Everything was coming together nicely. Kirstin shut the journal and prepared to leave. She looked forward to discussing her findings with Janet and Humphrey when they met for dinner that evening.

Chapter 26

Barry.

Janet sat in the front bar of the Empire Hotel, sipping coke and sarsaparilla. The hotel was in one of Canberra's less salubrious suburbs and a well-known haunt of petty criminals. She recognized a group in a corner and was amused to see that one was attired in the sort of garb donated by organizations specializing in the rehabilitation of habitual offenders. From the man's well-scrubbed look she guessed he had been let out of the nick that very morning.

She was dressed in her junkie outfit: dirty singlet, tight jeans, cloth bag and canvas shoes. The pinpricks on her arm were real and had been made with a sterilized needle, followed by an application of freshly cut chilli. The unsightly skin condition, affecting her neck and shoulders, was something that she had never tried before and she was particularly pleased with the result.

She had used the skin of new potatoes, peeling it off with a sharp knife and holding it in place with antihistamine cream. The peelings had an uncanny resemblance to diseased human skin and she'd spent time admiring herself in the mirror. The effect was stunning. It looked as if she'd contracted something horrible and contagious. The barman averted his eyes. He was probably holding his breath, too. The other aid to her Ms Revolting Act was never to wash her Ms Revolting clothes.

She was waiting for Barry Waters. She had been following him, eavesdropping on his conversations, using listening devices she'd failed to return to the Narcotics Bureau. Her favourite was in the form of a small radio that had been spray painted in psychedelic colours. It had a directional microphone where the speaker was normally located and was fitted with earphones. She had perfected a technique for staring aimlessly into space, head nodding, lips moving ... ears listening to everything her target was saying.

The day before, Barry had received a number of phone calls. Most related to horse racing but one was of a far more interesting nature. Barry's whole demeanour changed. To Janet's amusement, he'd almost stood to attention. She heard only half the conversation. Barry was being instructed to get something ready. She had not been able to make out what ... but it was important.

Things were beginning to hot up. She was making progress and so was Humph. At first, she'd not taken his historical researches seriously. The events he was investigating had taken place so long ago it seemed inconceivable that they could have any relevance to what had happened to Tim and David. Yet, contrary to all her expectations, the past had come hurtling forward to confront the present.

Humphrey had done no more than show some old ladies photographs of half-naked, fifteen-year-old Doris and, like an evil genie from a bottle, Footsie had appeared. Humphrey was doing his best to play down the incident. But there were some nasty cuts on his nose. Given Footsie's past history, one had to conclude that Humphles had come off lightly.

She was envious. By some cruel twist of fate, Humphrey had got all the action. Perhaps it was beginner's luck. It shouldn't have happened like that. Normally, one spent hour after painstaking hour stalking people, followed by hours of report writing. Sometimes the reports were acted upon. More often they vanished onto the top floor of the Narcotics Bureau, never to be heard of again.

Janet felt cheated. Why Humphles? Why hadn't she been confronted by a secateurs-wielding Santa Claus on a pedestal, in a secluded place, in the dark of night? There were things she would like to do to Footsie.

Chapter 27

Rebirth.

The rain had stopped but the water in the creek was still high. Rebecca watched her father pacing up and down, contemplating whether they should try to cross the ford. He was a lay preacher and due to deliver a sermon in two days. She said the chance of getting to the church on time was zero.

He muttered something along the lines 'God will provide'.

Normally Rebecca would have said nothing. This time she exploded.

'God wouldn't have to provide if we'd provided for ourselves.'

She grabbed her sketchpad.

'I suppose your sermon will include something about the sin of taking a phone on holiday. There's probably something in the Bible about it.'

Her father tried to speak but she didn't give him a chance.

'If we had a phone, we'd be able to tell people we can't get back on time. We might even find someone to tow us out.'

Rebecca turned and stomped away. She wanted somewhere to draw. Somewhere peaceful, far away from her preaching father and annoying little brother. David's shelter caught her eye. She walked over and he looked up but made no attempt to speak.

Rebecca sat down and started to draw. Charcoal was her favourite medium. It gave the textures she needed. For a while David ignored her. She resisted the temptation to speak and was pleased when he took an interest in what she was doing. Her charcoal stick moved round and round, lightly to get shape, hard for final form.

David got up and walked across.

'What are you doing, Beckie?'

'I'm drawing.'

'Can I see?'

'Sure.'

It was like attracting a moth to a light. He took a step forward and she continued with her sketch.

'What are you drawing?'

She did her best to look cool. 'It's an illustration for a story my grandmother told me when I was a little girl.'

He lent over her shoulder and watched. The drawing was of a young man and woman on a beach. David was struck by the image. For some reason it pulsed with a vital message. The young woman's face was serene. The man's was contorted. He had pulled away the bark cloth that covered her back. Inside, there was a cavity with a skull.

'My father doesn't like me to do these drawings,' Rebecca said. 'He says they're part of the old religion and best forgotten.'

David took the sketchpad from her.

'Tell me about it, Beckie.'

'It's about a young boy. He lived on a remote island where there were no girls his own age and he was filled by a deep yearning. He saw how happy his mother and father were and wanted to be like them ... he wanted a girl of his own.'

She took the pad from him and continued her story.

'One day, as he was walking along the beach feeling sad, a beautiful girl came out of the sea and came towards him. They fell in love and were married. They lived as man and wife and had a child. But there was a strange thing about their relationship. The young woman always wore a bark cloth that she never removed, even when she was bathing or making love. The cloth covered her back which was the only part of her body her husband had never seen. It was the part she didn't want him to know about because in her back was a cavity and in that cavity there was a tiny skull and bones.'

Rebecca turned the drawing towards David and was shocked by his reaction.

'It doesn't last. That's what the story is about.'

'What's the matter, David?'

'There's nothing strange about the girl,' he sobbed. 'She's like all of us. We'll all die. We just don't like to think about it. That's what the story is about. We all carry death inside us.'

He collapsed onto the sand and Rebecca knelt beside him.

'Tell me what happened, David. You can't keep it bottled up inside of you. It will drive you crazy.'

Slowly the story emerged. He told her about Tim and how he died. Then, he told her about Doris and the suitcase. The story became odder and odder. Rebecca knew her father would never believe it. He would say David was a dangerous criminal and should be handed over to the police. But, Rebecca believed him. She knew instinctively that David was the sort of person you could trust.

Telling his story lifted a great weight from David's mind. He wiped his face and stared pleadingly at her.

'What shall I do?'

'You'll have to go to the police sooner or later.'

'No. They've set me up.'

'There must be someone you can trust. You said your grandfather was important in the government. Can't you ask him to help?'

'My grandfather is old. He's not well. He wouldn't know what to do.'

'There must be someone ... think, David.'

He stared at his feet and started to prod the sand with his toes.

'There is someone. His mother used to work for my grandfather. They know about Charlie and Tong Yee's journal. They helped translate it. That's how we knew where to look for the gold.'

'You could phone them.'

David thought for a while. 'What if their line's being tapped?'

'Do you think that likely?'

'I don't know,' David shook his head. 'The police searched their house. They could be spying on them for all I know. They found out we were going to Cooktown. Footsie and those two policemen were waiting for us when we got there.'

'Do your friends live in Canberra?'

'Yes.'

'I'm going to uni in Canberra next week,' Rebecca said. 'I could go and see them. Give them my cell phone. That's not being tapped. You could phone its number and speak to them.'

Chapter 28

War Council.

The butchers' paper was out on the kitchen table, held in place by sticky tape and half-filled wineglasses. It was covered in the multi-coloured diagrams that Humphrey regarded as essential to any investigation. The time was 9pm. The place was the Hansen residence. Elizabeth was in her room and could be heard dancing to her ballet records. Humphrey presided over the table like a general marshalling his troops.

'A picture is beginning to emerge ...'

He spoke in a voice Janet would once have found irritating but now recognized as the way Humphrey talked when his mind was totally concentrated on the task in hand.

He reached for a black pen.

'Item one. The Tom Lee journal has identified Doris and Rosie as half-sisters. Rosie is his granddaughter by his son, Edward, whom he regarded as a waster. In contrast, his son James, who became a distinguished surgeon, was the apple of his father's eye.'

'Do you think the present thing has anything to do with Edward?' Janet asked.

'I doubt it,' Humphrey shrugged. 'He was only twenty-four when he was killed in a pub brawl. I would put my money on his daughter Rosie.'

'Item two. Tom regarded Rosie as an intelligent and forceful young woman and believed she and her accomplice had embarked on a life of crime.'

'Item three. Rosie was engaged in a blackmail operation in Townsville during the war years. Her victims were senior American, Australian and British military personnel.'

'Item four. Rosie's accomplice was a junior officer in the Australian administration. Tom represents him by Chinese characters that suggest an official who is young and subject to corruption. We identify him as the Knave.'

'Item five. After the war, Rosie established a major trucking empire, based on war surplus materials ... almost certainly acquired illegally.'

Janet looked up from her wine.

'Go over that one again.'

'Okay. Bill Maxwell and his friend, Tom O'Brien, have traced the origin of Rosie's empire to Baker Enterprises.'

'Baker what?'

'She changed her name to Baker and called herself Mrs Rosalind Baker. But, on the vehicle registration documents, she's referred to as Miss Rose Baker, formerly Lee.'

'Those boys should be worth a couple of frogs.' Janet alluded to Tim's habit of awarding chocolate frogs to dive students who did well in their tests. 'Why do they think the war surplus materials were acquired illegally?'

'Bill has ascertained that huge quantities of US army equipment were scheduled for destruction when the troops withdrew but there is no record of more than token amounts being destroyed. Even today there are people looking for secret caches in tunnels which the Americans are believed to have dug into hillsides that are now part of suburban Townsville.'

'What sort of equipment?' Janet asked.

'Trucks, jeeps, furniture, beds, bedding, canned food, liquor, prefabricated buildings,' Humphrey threw out his arms expressively. 'All the things needed to run an army.'

'And you think they ended up in Rosie's hands?'

'I'm sure they did.'

Humphrey added another line to the diagram.

'Bill has traced over fifty missing trucks to Baker Enterprises through transport department records. You can bet your life they were only part of what went astray and you can be equally sure Rosie used blackmail to acquire them. Just think of the hold she had on some people. She had explicit photos of them in bed with two prostitutes ... one of whom was underage.'

He picked up a crayon and began to write.

'Item six. Baker Enterprises was sold off in 1961 with the exception of one sole property. The sale raised about \$50 million at present-day prices.'

'Item seven. The property which was not sold was the Island View Hotel. Its title was transferred to a Hong Kong based trust together with a considerable sum of money.'

'Tom Lee mentioned such a trust,' Kirstin said. 'He set it up for his grandchildren.'

'Item eight. From 1956 the Island View ceased to be a brothel and traded as a normal hotel. Then, in about 1970, it changed its character again, becoming a retirement home for elderly prostitutes.'

'You're joking.'

'No.' Humphrey shook his head. 'The three old dears, I met, were the last of the bunch.'

'So Rosie looked after her girls.'

'Not all of them,' Kirstin interjected. 'She banished her little sister to Hong Kong. Remember what Doris told David. She said she wouldn't be there if it wasn't for "Fucking Rosie".'

Kirstin imitated David's rendering of Doris' voice then switched to the half-refined tones of an up-and-coming business lady of the 1950s. 'I think Mrs Rosalind Baker didn't want her vulgar little sister to spoil her nice new image. Don't forget, Rosie Lee was a prostitute who ran a brothel but Rosalind Baker was a professional lady who made donations to worthy causes and was photographed with state premiers and other dignitaries.'

Humphrey began to scribble again.

'Item nine. The Island View is up for sale.'

'Fair dinkum?' Janet said.

'Absolutely. Three days after I left, it went onto the market.'

'My God. You certainly stirred things up, Humphres.'

Humphrey took that as the highest possible accolade he could expect from Janet.

'You did more than frighten three old ladies,' she continued.

'It would seem so,' Humphrey picked up his wineglass and emptied it in one gulp.

'I wouldn't be quite so blasé, Humphrey.' Kirstin moved the bottle from his reach. 'You wouldn't be so cocky if Footsie were to walk through that door.'

Humphrey ignored the remark.

'Item ten. Charlie Paget is probably still alive.'

'Item eleven. Charlie has dealt in both drugs and arms.'

'Item twelve. Charlie is engaged in a vendetta against Rosie.'

Janet pulled a face.

'What makes you think that?'

'Because Doris told David that the suitcase contained something which would be damaging to Rosie.'

Janet reached for a pen and added some information to the case diagram that Humphrey had sketched. Kirstin watched him refill his glass. She was feeling tired and the conversation was leading nowhere. Janet and Humphrey were drinking too much.

See Annex 2

'I'm off to bed.'

She glanced at the case diagram, rose wearily to her feet, climbed the stairs and was about to enter her room when she heard the muted sounds of ballet music.

'Grandma.'

Elizabeth opened her door.

'I stayed up because I couldn't get to sleep. I just can't stop thinking about what happened. Melanie Milkovitz is so upset. I just can't believe David killed her dad. It's all so awful.'

Kirstin took her hand. 'We don't know what happened.'

Elizabeth let out a deep sigh. 'The papers say ...'

'We don't always believe what's in the newspapers. Remember what daddy said.'

'But, the girls at school believe it. They think it's true.'

'Darling,' Kirstin squeezed her granddaughter's hand, 'we're doing our best to find out what really happened. Please trust us.'

Chapter 29

Wombat's Den.

A cold front was passing through Canberra and it had started to rain. In Far North Queensland the skies had cleared and the torrential rains had given way to sunshine. Creek and river levels were falling fast. The Longboat camp was about thirty miles north of Cooktown at the northern end of the vast stretch of land belonging to the Hope Vale Aboriginal community. Rebecca's father had obtained their permission to spend a short vacation there. Now, for the first time in three weeks, it looked as if they would be able to leave and return to Townsville.

David and Rebecca drove the van up to the ford to see if it was passable. Channels had been gouged by the floodwaters and they spent some time filling them with boulders and small stones. Eventually a path was secured. David found a spare radiator hose and used it to improvise a snorkel for the exhaust pipe. It would be submerged when they crossed but the hose would prevent water from being sucked into the engine if it stalled. He signalled to Rebecca and guided her over the narrow path they had constructed.

She kept the vehicle in first gear and took it through at a slow pace. David was impressed. A lot of people would have crashed forward trying to get across as quickly as possible. Beckie knew you didn't do it like that. You had to play it cool. You had to stay in control and that meant you had to know what you were doing. He watched as the water rose up the sides of the van. There were difficult moments but she coaxed the old vehicle along, slipping the clutch and manoeuvring the wheels from side to side. The van cleared the creek and David ran forward.

'Good on yer, Beckie.'

He reached for her hand.

'You took that real cool. Most people would have rushed in and splashed water onto the engine ... and that would've given us a whole heap of problems.'

Rebecca basked in his praise. She knew David would say things just to be polite but this time he meant it. She was certain of that. He'd overcome his traumas and was ready to face the challenges ahead. There was a bush hotel where he could hide out. She'd camped there with a party of students on a biological field trip. The hotel was run by an old Englishman who had the sort of accent you heard in TV dramas about aristocratic families in country mansions. He was an alcoholic with a tribe of children by different mothers.

'You'll be safe at the Wombat's Den,' she said. 'Ted will look after you. He won't charge. You'll just have to help out with odd jobs. You can stay there until I get down to Canberra and give my phone to your friend. You've not forgotten the number have you?'

David recited the number with precision and Rebecca was impressed. He was obviously very competent. She imagined him in his dive shop and saw him building it up into an exciting eco-tourism business with big boats and marine scientists to give lectures and take people on underwater excursions.

'You are going to teach me how to dive?'

'Only if I can clear myself.'

'You will, David.'

'I'm not so sure.'

'Think positive, David.' She grasped his arm. 'It won't be long. I'll be in Canberra in a few days' time. I'll give my mobile to Humphrey. You can phone him. He'll know what to do.'

They reached the Wombat's Den after a drive of about an hour over rough dirt roads. The old pub was in a sleepy hollow and had no claims to fame. Edward Lacey had bought it twenty years earlier and was soon accepted by the mixed bunch of locals, despite his upper-class British accent which he made no attempt to hide.

He had the habit of addressing younger males as 'dear boy', which had given the impression that his sexual tendencies might be inclined to persons of his own gender. Time soon proved otherwise. Ted was now part of the scene. His hotel was rundown. The licensing inspectors had excluded it from their beat. It was a place where so little happened that no one in authority paid it a visit.

Ted came out to greet them, wrapping his arms around Rebecca and giving her a big kiss. David assumed she accepted that sort of behaviour because Ted was so much older. His attempts to give her a mild kiss had met with rebuff.

They unloaded his gear from the van. There was scarcely anything to it. Apart from his watch and dive knife, everything else belonged to Rebecca's father. He found that depressing. It was like he'd been stripped of his past. One of his martial arts instructors had told him that the perfect warrior was an island to himself ... he didn't need people. David decided he was not a perfect warrior.

Rebecca climbed back into the van. He waved goodbye, picked up his meagre belongings and followed Ted into the hotel. He felt like the young man in Rebecca's painting ... lonely and unhappy. Ted's insistence on calling him 'dear boy' added to his sense of unease.

Chapter 30

Old Archives.

Fourteen days had passed since David's disappearance. Janet sat on the pavement, attired in her Ms Revolting outfit, contemplating the delicate balance between being truly revolting and merely disgusting. Her listening device hung from her ear and she was singing a tuneless dirge. A polystyrene cup with a few coins lay at her feet. She had been there for over two hours and was feeling cold.

Her target was Barry Waters. His flat was opposite. She pulled a dirty shawl about her shoulders and glimpsed a familiar figure coming towards her. Barry looked like a man on a mission. His slovenly step had been replaced by a brisk trot. Despite his flabby build, he looked almost athletic. Janet suspected that he had once been in the army. His bearing was military. She guessed he'd been retired for some reason ... probably criminal.

'Spare some change!'

He showed not the slightest interest in her as he hurried past. The lights in his flat went on. A minute passed and he was back on the street again.

‘Spare some change!’

He ignored her. Janet wasn’t put out. Everyone ignored her. That was the beauty of her persona. No one wanted to have anything to do with her. It was the prize that came from being Ms Revolting.

She scooped up the coins in the cup. As usual, not one had been put there by anyone but herself. She was reminded of an absurd conversation she once had with the financial controller of the Narcotics Bureau. The silly bastard wanted her to declare her takings as a beggar while working as an undercover agent.

Barry proceeded down the road. Janet watched him turn into an alley and staggered to her feet. She didn’t want to behave out of character but needed to hurry, which was something Ms Revolting rarely did.

She threw the polystyrene cup into the bushes and sped to the corner. What she saw caused her to pull up sharply. A white van was parked near her motorbike. She reverted to an aimless shuffle. The van didn’t look right. But lots of things don’t look right. People who drive white vans often park without due consideration for others.

She reached the van. The sound of rap music was coming from inside. That didn’t mean anything either. People who play rap have a lot in common with people who drive white vans. Then her wandering gaze caught sight of a familiar face in the wing mirror. A moment later the door flew open.

‘Freeze!’

Barry confronted her with a handgun. She’d not seen the weapon before but had no doubt it was real. Then the rear door opened and another gun appeared.

‘Keep quiet and do as you’re told.’

The order was delivered with precision. There was something frighteningly professional about it.

‘Get into the van, darling.’

The second voice belonged to Barry. Janet wasn’t fazed by him. But the other man worried her. He showed every sign of being far more competent. When the opportunity came she would neutralize him then take out Barry. She dropped her head and began to snuffle.

‘What are you doing? Are you police?’

‘Move!’

‘I’ve not done nothing.’

She grasped her hands together and shook violently.

‘You can have me if you like. I don’t mind. You can do it to me. I’m sexy ... if you want.’

‘Shut up!’

‘Please don’t hurt me.’

‘Get into the van!’

Janet climbed into the rear and was handcuffed to a seatbelt anchor point. Barry got in after her, gun in hand. The van pulled off and he leant forward.

‘We’re going to take you to a little party, darling.’

Janet stared at him ... face distorted in terror.

‘You’re going to meet your friends, darling.’

‘I need a fix,’ Janet shook uncontrollably. ‘Please let me have a fix.’

Barry prodded her with his foot.

'Don't you want to know what sort of games we'll be playing?'

'I gotta have my fix.'

Her tongue hung out and she started to froth at the mouth.

It was a special skill that she had perfected but Barry was unmoved by the performance.

'Don't you want to know about the party, darling?'

Janet looked out of the window. They'd made no attempt to blindfold her or hide their identities. That was worrying. Drug dealers have few scruples about killing people. They take out the opposition, they take out people who cheat on them and they take out undercover agents who can't be bribed.

The van passed the National Library, continued towards the old parliamentary complex then turned down a narrow lane. After a short distance it stopped. The driver got out and Janet heard a gate being unlocked. She recognized the place as the former National Archives: a warren of underground passages, once stacked with documents, now vacated.

Barry turned to speak.

'This is where we'll be having our party, darling. Our friend Footsie is already here and so is one of your friends. We'll be asking questions and, when you don't answer, Footsie will play games with her. I think you know about Footsie and what he does to the friends of people who won't cooperate.'

Janet resolved to remove Footsie from circulation.

'The nice thing about our venue is that there aren't no neighbours,' Barry continued to torment her. 'We can make as much noise as we like and nobody will phone the police to complain.'

The driver returned to the van and Barry unlocked the handcuffs. Janet cowered in a corner and refused to cooperate. She wanted to entice him closer. Get him to lay hands on her ... and suffer the consequences.

'Move!'

She feigned terror but it didn't work. Something sharp jabbed into her arm and she realized she'd been stabbed. The pain didn't trouble her but the injury did. Her ability to fight was severely compromised. For the first time in her life Janet Pulnitz was frightened.

The driver grabbed her by the legs and pulled her from the van. She fell to the ground and Barry yanked her back up, inflicting further wounds with his knife. An iron grill was opened and she was pushed through it into an unloading bay. From there a door led to a labyrinth of musty corridors lined with rusting storage racks.

'Over there!'

Barry led her to a pipe and clamped the handcuff on it.

'Okay, darling.'

He shone his torch in her face.

'We're going to get the party boy. He wasn't home when we called so we're going back for him.' He spat in her face. 'Our friend Footsie is already here, like I said. So don't think you can scream for help. Because, if you do, Footsie will come and cut your bleeding tongue out.'

* * * * *

The electric mixer juddered to a stop, accompanied by blue sparks and a smell of burning. Humphrey shot to the wall and hit the switch. He feared that he'd wrecked the machine and was dislodging pieces of coconut from between the blades when the telephone rang. He heard Kirstin's voice.

'Has Elizabeth come home?'

'I thought she was with you, Mother.'

'No. I got to ballet class and couldn't find her.'

'Probably nothing, Mother. She often goes to Helen Milios' place after ballet. I'll give them a call.'

'They're ex-directory, Humphrey. Do you have their number?'

'No.'

'Then I think you should go round there right away. In view of recent events, you should be concerned about your daughter's safety.'

The stark realization that something could be badly wrong suddenly dawned. Humphrey kicked off his slippers and ran to find his shoes. A minute later he was in his car trying to start the engine. He finally got it going by running it down the driveway and engaging second gear.

He reached the Milios house and rang the bell. The sound of music and girlish laughter reassured him. It all seemed so familiar ... Elizabeth and Helen playing records and chatting.

The door opened and Maria Milios appeared.

'Humphrey. I thought I heard your car.'

'Yes. It does make rather a distinctive sound.'

He smiled. 'I've come for Elizabeth.'

'She's with Kirstin.' Mary Milios smiled back. 'Today's Wednesday. Your mother collects Lizzie on Wednesdays.'

Humphrey paled. 'She wasn't there when mother went to collect her. We assumed she'd come back here with Helen.'

Maria called her daughter and asked what had happened.

'I went to look for her after ballet,' Helen said. 'I thought I'd find her round at the back where she waits for her gran. When I got there some girls said a van stopped and a man in a uniform got out. He said something and Lizzie went off with him.'

Humphrey's face turned ashen and he felt weak. Maria reached out a hand to steady him. 'Do you think something has happened to her?'

'I don't know,' Humphrey shook his head.

'Should we phone the police?'

'Yes ... I think we should.'

Humphrey reached for his phone and dialled the number with a heavy heart. As someone who worked in crime prevention, he knew there was little the police could do. Sixteen-year-old girls went missing all the time. The forces of law and order usually got involved after something terrible had happened. Their ability to stop it happening was minimal.

* * * * *

Janet waited for the van to drive off then set about freeing herself. A Thai kickboxer had taught her a procedure for escaping from ropes, chains and other

tight bonds. It involved the dislocation of bones and was regarded as too risqué to be taught at police academy. Within a minute she had extracted her hand from the handcuff and was struggling to coax it back into shape. Her arm hung awkwardly. The puncture wound to her shoulder had numbed the senses. But she could still grasp things securely if she concentrated on the task in hand, which was to pick the padlock holding the iron grill in place.

She kept a piece of wire for such a purpose in her shoe. She took it out and probed the lock. Eventually, the mechanism showed signs of yielding. She tugged with her injured left hand and probed with the numbed right. There was a faint click. The lock disengaged and the grill swung open.

The sound of rap reverberated in her ears. It echoed down the maze of passageways and she guessed Footsie was holed up somewhere in the dark recesses of the complex. She was determined to get him but first she had to warn Humphrey. There was a public telephone booth on the main highway. She sprinted back to it and found a young woman inside.

‘Get out! This is important!’

The girl stared back in stunned silence and was ejected.

Janet dialled the Hansen number. When no one answered she phoned Humphrey’s mobile. A long wait followed and a voice said the phone was either disconnected or out of range. Janet left the booth and ran back the way she’d come.

There wasn’t a moment to lose. The prison psychiatrist had described Footsie as a dangerous psychopath. There was no limit to what he might do and one of her friends was there ... she didn’t know who.

The music was still playing when she got back. It echoed down the musty corridors and, for the first time in her life, Janet was thankful for the sound of rap. It would lead her to her target. Footsie wouldn’t stand a chance. Her arms might be out of action but there was nothing wrong with her legs.

She pushed open the iron grill and groped her way along rusting shelves towards a chink of light that got brighter as the rap got louder. An open door beckoned. The rap was turned to full volume. There was no way the ugly man would hear her. She reached the door and charged in, screaming at the top of her voice, geared for a flying kick to the throat.

But her target wasn’t positioned for that sort of blow.

Janet stopped in her tracks. Someone had got there before her. She drew in a deep breath and stared at the bloodied figure on the floor. Footsie was on his back, choking on something thrust down his throat.

Her eyes ran past the knife protruding from his naked belly and alighted on the hole where his genitals had once been. Then her attention returned to the unsightly mess in his mouth and guessed what had happened to them.

Footsie was bleeding profusely but not yet dead. Whoever had performed the worthwhile deed had only just left. If she’d got there a moment earlier she would have blundered into him.

There wasn’t time to think about it. Barry said one of her friends was there. She turned off the rap and listened. The room was lit by a portable gas lamp and decorated with toy balloons. Her eyes sped round the walls and settled on an open door.

Moans came from inside.

She grabbed the lamp and the flickering light fell on a naked figure spread-eagled on a dirty mattress: hands and feet tied to the corners of a steel-framed bed, mouth closed with surgical tape.

'Lizzie!'

She ran inside.

'He can't hurt you anymore ...'

She ripped the tape from the hysterical teenager's face.

'You're safe now. I'll soon get you out of here.'

She struggled to untie the knots and gave up. Her fingers were numb and there wasn't time. Barry and his homicidal mate could be back at any moment. She ran back to Footsie, pulled the knife from his belly and used it to cut Elizabeth free.

* * * * *

It was perhaps a heightened state of anxiety that aroused her suspicions. Normally, Kirstin would have taken no notice of the white van parked beside the road but her nerves were on edge and she took in every detail from the spotlight on the roof to the faces watching her as she drove past.

It was a stake-out.

Forty years in counter-intelligence had honed her instincts to perfection. The men in the van might think they were acting naturally. Their expressions said otherwise. They were psyched up ... ready for action.

She couldn't go home. They had the house under surveillance. Better to go next door. She was minding the house for the neighbours while they were on holidays. She swung into the driveway, unlocked the front door and bolted it behind her. There was a phone in the hallway. She fumbled for it in the dark and dialled Humphrey's mobile.

'Is that you, Mother?'

He answered immediately.

'Have you found her, Humphrey?'

'No.' He sounded on the verge of tears. 'I went round there. Helen said a white van had stopped and a man in a uniform had spoken to Lizzie. She said Lizzie got into the van with him. I tried to phone you ... then the car broke down.'

Headlights appeared in the driveway.

'Humphrey.' Kirstin's voice rose an octave. 'The white van's here. They're after me. Call the police. Tell them to come straight round.'

A figure was silhouetted in the doorway.

'Mrs Hansen. We're the police ...'

At fifty-nine Kirstin was still agile enough to climb the fence into a neighbouring garden. She ran through to the laundry and was about to leave by the backdoor when footsteps sounded outside. Her heart froze. They had her trapped. She couldn't possibly go outside. There was no way she could outrun them.

An incident from her younger days flashed back. She was snooping around in a fifth-floor apartment when the occupants arrived home unexpectedly. Her only option was to go out onto the balcony and spend a cold night in the rain while they smoked pot and made love to Elvis records. The house didn't have a balcony

but the garage had a flat roof. She ran upstairs and reached the landing as the panels in the front door were smashed in.

Kirstin opened a window and climbed onto the garage roof. Moments later, the front door burst open and feet pounded up the stairs. They went into one of the bedrooms. Lights were switched on. Doors were opened and closed. The bathroom was entered then the toilet. There was a lot of swearing and the footsteps returned to the landing. A head poked out the window.

‘Where the fuck’s she gone?’

He was so close she could smell his breath.

‘Have you searched all the rooms?’ a voice shouted from the garden.

‘Course I bloody have. I’ve even looked under the beds.’

‘What about downstairs?’

‘No bloody way. I saw her come up here ...’

A siren wailed and was getting nearer.

The man heard it too.

‘Shit!’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Police. Can’t you fucking hear them?’

‘Could be an ambulance.’

‘No. I can see the lights.’

The head withdrew and feet clattered down the stairs. Kirstin saw a figure dash from the house. He was joined by the other man. They jumped into the van and the engine roared.

For a while there was confusion. The van took off backwards and went into a sharp turn. Tires screeched as it accelerated away. Kirstin saw the police car. She expected it to go in pursuit but it braked and swung into her driveway. Two uniformed officers sprang out with drawn weapons. One ran to the rear of the house and the other banged on her front door.

‘Mrs Hansen ... police!’

Kirstin waved down at him.

‘I’m up here on the garage roof.’

‘Where?’

The young officer flashed his spotlight.

‘No ... next door. I came up here to get away from them.’

The spotlight crossed the fence and settled on her.

‘Are you Mrs Kirstin Hansen?’

‘Yes. Please listen!’ She pointed to the tail lights of the fleeing van. ‘You’ve got to get after them. They’ve got my granddaughter.’

The young man seemed incapable of understanding the urgency of the situation. He kept his light trained on her and spoke in an unhurried voice as if they had all the time in the world.

‘Look where you are standing, Mrs Hansen.’

‘I’m all right.’

‘There’s a big drop. You’d be badly hurt if you fell.’

‘Stop worrying about me.’

Kirstin continued to wave her arms. ‘It’s my granddaughter. You’ve got to get after those men. They’ve taken her ...’

'Your granddaughter is safe now, Mrs Hansen.'

A shiver ran down Kirstin's spine.

'What do you mean safe now?'

'She's being looked after.' The young man ignored the question. 'We'll take you back to the station. Your son will be there. He'll tell you what's happened. I'll come up and help you down.'

* * * * *

Samantha Fischer pulled on her jacket and hurried out of the office. She was needed on the ground floor where a severely traumatized young person had just arrived. The scene was much as she expected: hysterical teenager and distraught relatives.

As a cadet, Samantha had been greatly distressed by such incidents. Now, she'd grown used to them. A girl of about sixteen was being consoled by a grey-haired woman. A red-faced man sat nearby ... totally devastated.

Then, she saw Janet. Her friend was slumped on a bench, in a far corner, covered in blood. If Samantha hadn't known her, she'd have thought that Janet Pulnitz was a junkie who had got into a fight and ended up on the losing side. Her right shoulder hung down and her left hand was swollen. On the other side of the police desk, a young woman was shouting and pointing.

'That's her. She's the one that pulled me off the phone and ripped my coat. She stinks. She shouldn't be allowed ...'

Samantha guessed that Janet had overstepped the mark in some undercover operation and did not, at first, suspect that her presence had anything to do with the young girl who had been attacked.

A woman doctor came and they found a quiet room where they could attend to the girl. The doctor decided to sedate both her and the father who was in a state of shock. It was then that Samantha realized there was a connection between Janet and the assault victim. She heard her colleagues talking. They knew Janet and were aware of her reputation for impulsive action.

'Smoking gun.'

Everyone agreed.

'Came out with the kid.'

'You know what she's like.'

'Have you heard what she thinks about sex offenders?'

They were the crew of a squad car and there could be no doubt who they were talking about. They'd responded to an anonymous call. Someone had been assaulted in the old National Archives. They'd arrived then wasted time trying to find an entrance. While they were searching, Janet had appeared, half-carrying, half-dragging the distraught girl. Both were covered in blood. Then they spoke about the body. Samantha could only share their suspicions ... Janet had hugely overstepped the mark this time.

Chapter 31

Aftermath.

Samantha Fischer looked up from her computer. It was Sunday and she was working overtime to complete her report on the rape of a young girl and the death of her attacker. It was a particularly difficult task. She'd known Janet Pulnitz for years and had heard so much about the Hansens that she almost knew them.

To compound her problems, there was her special relationship with her boss. William Endicott was on a bird-watching expedition in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and his deputy, John Martin, was in charge. Samantha kept to the facts, avoiding anything which should be said rather than written.

The squad car had gone round to the old National Archives following an anonymous telephone call. It had been made by a male person, speaking with an Italian accent, which was almost certainly fake. Linguistic analysis had identified the caller as middle-aged and a native Australian speaker. He'd told the police to go straight round to the old archives where they would find a young girl who had been attacked and needed urgent attention.

Samantha turned on the recording and listened to it again. The call was delivered in a slow, measured voice and the foreign accent was maintained right up until the end ... or almost to the end.

The caller seemed about to put down the phone then added a final remark.

'You'd better get an ambulance round there real quick.'

The voice slid towards pure Australian.

Samantha knew she'd recognize it if she ever heard it again.

She switched off the recorder and thought about the implications. Attempts to get information from Janet had ended in frustration. Her friend had refused legal aid and had been remanded in custody. Janet's clothing was being subjected to a battery of forensic tests. Her injuries were being treated. Her case was hanging in limbo.

The incident had taken place on Wednesday and Janet had spent the night in the remand cells of the local police station. Then, on Thursday, she'd been transferred into the custody of a different branch of the Federal Police. John Martin was livid but there was nothing he could do about it. An order for the Narcotics Bureau to take control of the case had come from high up.

As she typed, Samantha began to think about the internal politics of the police service. She guessed why John Martin wanted the report and she guessed what he was going to do with it.

Chapter 32

Interview Room.

The room was bleak, forbidding and hygienic. Janet sat on a white plastic chair and glared at Cecil Sparrow who was sitting opposite. Her former boss was

dressed for the occasion. Janet figured she could read him like a book. Most of the time Cecil went to work in a drab suit. Today he was dressed to kill. Janet had seen him in the outfit before. Tailored jacket and brightly coloured tie that went halfway to hiding his heavy jowls and flabby frame. He wore the gear when he had to front up before parliamentary committees. It was his way of exuding power while covering up for his many weaknesses.

Today he was parading it for her benefit. Janet felt honoured. The guy was scared of her. For months she had tried to impress him with her talents. She'd produced brilliant reports and they'd never been acted upon. Now she understood why. She was finding out far too much. Cecil wasn't just an asshole ... he was corrupt.

Rodney O'Neill sat beside him in a drab suit. He was Sparrow's toad: a pathetic creature that made a living by climbing up arseholes. Janet listened as Rodney read from a prepared statement.

'29 February 2002, 11.05 am. Interview of Janet Louise Pulnitz, conducted by Chief Investigator C A Sparrow, AO, assisted by Principal Investigator R M O'Neill. Ms Pulnitz has been informed that she can request legal representation and has declined.'

Cecil peered over his spectacles.

'Will Ms Pulnitz please confirm that?'

'Yes.'

'To the camera please, Ms Pulnitz.'

Janet stood up and faced the nearest camera.

'I confirm I do not require legal assistance.'

'Ms Pulnitz ...'

Cecil glanced at his notes.

'You were formerly employed as a surveillance officer in the Investigatory Section of the Intelligence Division ...'

He continued in his dull monotone. Janet replied to each question with a curt 'Yes' until they touched on matters of a recent nature.

'Ms Pulnitz. What was your relationship with Timothy Price?'

'I have made that clear in a written statement.'

'Would you please repeat that statement?'

'No.'

'Do the names Sue Lynne Paget and Charles Paget mean anything to you?'

'Yes.'

'What do you know about these two persons?'

'Not much.'

'Will you please tell us what you know?'

'No.'

Chief Investigator Sparrow looked up from his notes.

'Ms Pulnitz. You do not appear to appreciate the seriousness of your situation. A man is dead. He was killed with a knife and your fingerprints are on that knife. What have you to say to that?'

Janet stood up and faced the camera.

'My fingerprints are on the knife for reasons that I gave in a sworn statement witnessed by officers Fischer and Jones of the ACT Police. I have nothing to add to that statement.'

She returned to her seat and brought her arm down heavily on the table. It was a move designed to emphasize her physical presence and leave no doubt that a threatening stance was being adopted. Its immediate effect was to start her wound bleeding again. Blood spread over the plain white sheets of the writing pad that had been placed there for her use, in accordance with official guidelines. She saw Rodney O'Neill staring at it and noted his unease.

'Mr O'Neill,' she adopted her sweetest tone. 'There is a box of tissues beside you. Would you be so kind as to pass it to me? My wound has opened and I need to quench the flow.'

Rodney pushed the box towards her and Janet spent some time cleaning herself. She produced a large amount of bloodstained paper and tossed it in Rodney's direction. 'Mr O'Neill, I'd be most appreciative if you would dispose of this. There is a wastepaper basket beside you.'

Rodney paled and Janet glared at him.

'I'm sure you don't mind the sight of blood, Mr O'Neill. You're such a tough guy. You shot Tim Price. You're famous.'

She leant forward.

'When I go to trial you'll be able to tell people about it ... all over again. You can bet my defence counsel will have lots of questions. I'll make sure he does.'

She turned to Cecil Sparrow.

'I am going to trial ... aren't I?'

'Ms Pulnitz ...' Cecil toyed with his pen.

'You are going to charge me with Footsie's murder ... aren't you?' Janet leant towards him. 'The newspapers will love it. We'll be famous. There's so much I can say. You might even appear on TV.'

Cecil Sparrow reached for the switch of the recording unit and turned it off. Janet knew she'd won.

Chapter 33

Late night call.

It was the middle of the night in Australia and midday in New York. David crept down to the phone beside the bar and dialled Sue Lynne's number. Within seconds he heard her voice.

'Sue Lynne. It's me.'

'Oh. My God.' She sounded flustered. 'I thought I'd never hear from you again.'

'I'm safe, Sue Lynne.'

'David. We've heard such awful things. It's all my fault. I don't know what to say.'

'Tim's dead.'

'It's in the newspapers here in New York, David.' She sounded on the edge of tears. 'They say you killed a policeman.'

'They were trying to kill us, Sue Lynne.'

'Where are you now?'

'At a hotel about three hours north of Cooktown. It's called the Wombat's Den. I'm doing odd jobs for my keep.'

'Do you think you're safe?'

'Yes. This place is so remote only the locals know it's here.'

There was silence. The phone sounded muffled. He wondered if she was speaking to someone. Then he heard her again.

'David.'

Her voice was now brisk and businesslike.

'Stay where you are. Phone tomorrow. We'll tell you what to do.'

Chapter 34

Doldrums.

Kirstin put down the telephone and walked into the kitchen to make herself a strong cup of coffee. She knew it would be bad for her. The caffeine would add to her arthritic problems. But she felt the need. Coffee took her back in time to a world when she was young and better able to cope.

She remembered long hours agonizing over ciphers made difficult because they were based on Shanghai criminal jargon. She wondered if she'd put her little boy at risk. Thinking back on it, she could only conclude that she had. The people she'd been investigating were without scruples. Much the same could have happened to little Humphrey as had happened to Elizabeth.

The coffee was thick. Kirstin sipped it, trying to collect her thoughts and work out the best course of action. She'd just spoken to her cousin, Mette, in Copenhagen. Despite the passage of years, Mette had not hesitated in agreeing to have Elizabeth stay with her. She'd told Mette about the assault and Elizabeth's distressed condition. She'd even said there might be security problems.

There was also Humphrey to worry about. He couldn't stop comparing himself with a university lecturer he had known. The man campaigned for the legalisation of marihuana and grew the weed and donated it to students. The university authorities threatened him with dismissal and he defied them. But he couldn't defy the mob. They thought he was trespassing on their territory. When he didn't stop, they sent Footsie round to his house and Footsie cut his baby son's toes off. The young man still bore his physical scars. Humphrey wondered if Elizabeth would carry her mental scars for the rest of her life.

He had accepted a post as lecturer in Chinese at a minor college and was determined to take his daughter to a new and safer life. Kirstin had tried to dissuade him but he was in no mood to listen.

* * * * *

The cell door clanged open and Janet prepared to leave. Her left hand had fully recovered but she still needed to support her right arm in a sling. No nerves or tendons had been severed and she was confident she would make a swift recovery. If things went as planned, she would be teaching karate in California in a few weeks and taking part in martial arts competitions soon after. She'd not been charged and was free to leave the country. There was no point in staying. David had been missing for over three weeks and was almost certainly dead.

Chapter 35

Welding job.

Ted lost no time putting David to work. There was painting to be done. Then he discovered that David had welding skills and asked him to fix the hotel's trailer. It was David's fourth day at the Wombat's Den and he was out in the backyard amongst a heap of discarded machinery and other ancient junk. The electric welder was in good condition but depended on a wind generator with diesel backup.

In a stiff breeze the system worked well but most of the time its performance was poor to useless. The wind kept dropping and the diesel failed to cut in. David couldn't understand how anyone could live under such conditions, let alone run a business. Yet Ted and his clientele at the Wombat's Den seemed to have no problems when the wind dropped and the lights dimmed ... so long as the beer remained cold.

He was keeping a low profile, pretending to be shy. He'd told Ted he had a liver condition and had to lay off the grog. That way he avoided going into the bar and being seen ... not that the hotel had many customers.

By the third day he could recognize all of them. There was a Thai couple who were scraping a living from a nearby tin deposit and a middle-aged German who was escaping his past. The other regulars were cattlemen ... Aboriginal and white. They sat in the bar after a long day's work and chatted amongst themselves.

David only worried when strangers appeared. He'd felt uneasy that morning. A white van had pulled up and a man had gone into the bar for a drink. There was nothing disturbing in that but, when he came out, he'd not gone straight to his vehicle. Instead, he'd walked round to where David was working.

At first David thought he was looking for the toilet. Then the man approached and asked if he wanted to earn some money welding. David asked about the nature of the job. The man didn't reply immediately. When he did, he seemed oddly unaware of what was needed.

Chapter 36

Unexpected call.

The telephone rang and Kirstin heard Cecilia Paget. She sounded more flustered than usual. 'I would have phoned earlier but I thought I should leave you alone,' Cecilia struggled for words. 'I mean you don't want to have people pestering you. Not after what happened. Your poor granddaughter. I can't stop thinking about it ...'

Kirstin had no doubt about the sincerity in Cecilia's voice. But how did she know something awful had happened? The newspapers had reported the incident. None had given the slightest clue to Elizabeth's identity.

'We were all so distressed,' Cecilia struggled on. 'Daddy shut himself in his room. He's not been so upset since what happened to David.'

Kirstin didn't know what to think. She'd always got along well with George Paget but that could hardly explain why her present problems should be such a cause of distress to the old man.

'He wants to give you some money.'

Kirstin could hardly believe her ears.

'Why?'

Cecilia did her best to explain. 'He thinks you should get your granddaughter away from here. He's not short of money. Money isn't important ... it's people that matter. That's what daddy says.'

Chapter 37

Dead meat.

David entered the yard and picked up his tools. Almost a month had passed since Tim's death and his desperate swim to safety. He went over to the pile of scrap metal where he was working. It was a good day for welding. The wind was blowing. The generator was humming and the output meter was giving a good voltage reading. He ground down a pair of surfaces and was about to begin welding when a van pulled into the yard. He recognized it from the day before. The man was back and he had another man with him. He stood, hand on hips, as they walked over.

'Do you remember me?'

David felt uneasy. The man's behaviour had been suspicious on his first visit and it hadn't improved. He watched as they moved in on him.

'A friend of yours asked me to find you.'

The man paused as if expecting a reply.

'She's called Sue Lynne, David. She sent us to find you.'

David remained silent.

'You know who I'm taking about?'

David nodded.

'She wants us to help you ... take you out of here.'

David eyed him coldly. 'What password did she give?'

'Password? She didn't give no password.'

There was nothing wrong with the reply but the words continued to say one thing while the body language said another. David's fingers tightened on his welding hammer and he changed his stance slightly, ready to take defensive action.

The response was immediate.

'Drop it!'

The second man leapt forward and levelled a gun at his stomach.

'Listen, kid. We can shoot you here or you can come with us ... you decide.'

He turned to the other man.

'Keep an eye on that silly old bugger in the bar. If he looks like he's going to give trouble, blow his fucking brains out.'

They pushed David into the van and handcuffed him to a seatbelt anchor point. There were scratches below it and some looked recent. David swung his arm and the handcuff followed the scratches. It was a chilling observation. He wondered who else had been imprisoned there and what had happened to them.

The first man drove. David expected him to go out into the road. Instead he made for the track leading to the tip where Ted disposed of the pub's garbage. It was poised on the edge of a gully that led down to a creek far below.

The man with the gun lent over the back of his seat.

'We know who you are, kid, but we've not introduced ourselves.'

He gave a malignant grin.

'I'm Clive and my colleague here is Barry. We're Barry and Clive. You won't have heard of us because we are not as famous as Bonnie and Clyde. That is because we are not publicity seekers like what they were.'

The pair laughed uproariously, rocking in their seats, peering at him in the rear mirror. There was something ritualistic about the performance, as if they did it for all their captives. David was reminded of a cat tormenting a mouse before killing it.

Clive pointed towards the dump.

'You're going on a little ride, kid. It'll be the last you take so you'd better make the best of it. My good friend here is going to demonstrate the skills he has acquired in off-road driving. You may find some of them a bit scary but don't let that bother you. It's what comes after that you need to worry about.'

As if on cue, Barry swung the wheel and headed for a pile of soggy mattresses that had failed to make their way over the edge of the gully. He crashed into them and started an avalanche. Years of accumulated rubbish slid down and the van followed.

Once in, there was no way of stopping. David was reminded of the slides at Water World. You lay on a mat and were channelled along brightly coloured tubes to a pool of clear water. This was more like a mudslide and you did it in a van.

Walls of sticky clay funnelled them towards a slimy creek. Barry steered with one hand, rising up in his seat, yelling continuously. He reminded David of a hick rodeo rider at a country show. Somehow the van remained upright and pointing in the right direction.

'You beauty!'

They reached the creek and crashed into it. Mud sprayed over the windscreen and Barry drove blind until the wipers cleared it off. The creek was dry but littered with debris from the recent rains. The van bounced over the smaller bits and rode up the bank to avoid the larger. David was thrown around like a lump of meat on a chain. The handcuff bit into his wrist and blood ran down his arm.

'You're breaking my arm!'

He screamed and the van slowed. At first, he thought it was out of concern for his safety. Then he realized they wanted to gloat over his misfortune.

Clive turned and sneered at him. 'You enjoyed that didn't you, kid?' He dug Barry in the ribs. 'Do it again. Give him some more fun.'

They took off, throwing up mud and stones.

David clasped the handcuff with his free hand and held it in a vice-like grip, determined to avoid further injury. His torment ended when they rounded a bend and hit a rock.

'You've broken my wrist!'

He screamed and held up a bloodied arm.

'Shut up! Or I'll break the other one.'

Clive got out of the van and went round to the front with Barry. David watched them coldly, assessing every move. They knew something about off-road driving and their gun handling skills were good. But it didn't go far beyond that. In the final analysis, they were a pair of yobbos. Sooner or later they'd make a mistake.

Clive took a sledgehammer from the tool compartment and used it against the bodywork of the van. David guessed the mudguard was crushed against the tire and needed to be forced clear. More blows were used than necessary and the aim was none too good.

They got back in and Barry took the wheel again. He seemed to have learnt nothing from the mishap and drove as erratically as before. To David's relief, the terrain flattened and the going got easier. Then a bridge appeared across the creek. True to form Barry kept going. This time there wasn't a chance. The bridge was too low to drive under and there was no way they could stop in time.

David shut his eyes as the van veered to one side and hit something. His world went upside down. They seemed to be flying through the air. Then a tremendous jolt told him they had returned to earth. He looked around in stunned amazement. The van had jumped the bank and was standing squarely on a road.

The two men laughed uncontrollably. For some reason they found the incident amusing. Or was it a release of tension? David didn't care. He felt contempt for them. Despite being handcuffed, he could have struck out with his free hand and killed Clive with a single blow. He'd practiced it a thousand times in his martial arts classes. But it was no good killing one and leaving the other.

Barry turned the engine back on and David watched impassively from the rear. The road had recently been graded and the van was able to keep up a steady pace. After a while, the pair stopped laughing and began to chatter, building themselves into a high level of excitement. Both were obsessed by what they intended to do to him. David analysed every move. Barry was not paying attention to the driving. Clive was grasping his gun carelessly. Each was babbling like an idiot. Neither saw the Landcruiser parked in the bushes.

'What do you know about castration, kid?'

David ignored the question.

'Have you ever had your nuts cut off?'

David saw a cloud of dust in the rear mirror and guessed the Landcruiser had left the bushes.

'That's what your mates done to Footsie ...'

David turned that piece of information over in his mind.

'We're going to cut off your nuts and send them to Janet.'

Barry laughed uncontrollably.

'I bet she's always wanted a pair.'

The cloud of dust became more pronounced.

Barry glanced in the mirror.

'We're being followed.'

'Probably one of the locals,' Clive said. 'Pull over and let the bastard pass.'

Barry slowed down.

'Not like that. Get well ahead then pull over.'

Barry sped up. The van mounted a rise and Clive grabbed the wheel.

'Down there!'

He forced the vehicle off the road and, for the third time that afternoon, David thought they were going to turn over. The van smashed through bushes and came to a halt behind a tree. There was a strong smell of petrol. David almost mentioned it but dropped the idea, not wanting to put ideas into Barry's head. To his dismay, Barry lit a cigarette.

'Don't you think you should offer the kid one?' Clive reached out a hand. 'Let the poor little bugger have his last smoke?'

'I don't smoke.'

'What's the matter, kid? Do you want to go to heaven with nice clean lungs?'

Clive took the cigarette from Barry's lips and blew a smoke ring in David's face. David watched their antics. If he could entice Clive nearer, he could take him out with a blow to the throat then continue through and eliminate Barry.

'You want to burn me with your cigarette,' he whimpered.

For a moment it seemed that Clive would rise to the bait. Then the sound of the other vehicle took his attention.

'You beauty!'

Clive watched the Landcruiser speed past.

'I told you he was a local. He couldn't care a fuck about us. All he wants is to get home and screw his missus.' He jerked at the wheel. 'There's a track back there. Let's see where it leads.'

The smell of petrol was overwhelming. David expected the van to burst into flames at any moment and was strangely relieved when Clive said they'd found a suitable spot to torture and kill him. They stopped on a patch of level ground beside the road. On one side the land rose sharply. On the other it fell away. Clive got out of the van, walked over to the edge of a low cliff and looked down at the vast expanse of trees and bushes below.

'It's nice out there,' he said reflectively. 'His ghost won't get bored. He'll always have something to look at.' He prodded the soft earth. 'The kid won't have any trouble digging his grave either. He'll be able to make it nice and deep so no dingoes will come and dig him up.'

He returned to the van and opened the back. David watched as table and chairs were brought out and set down on the red ground. Cans of beer were placed on the table together with sandwiches and a bottle of tomato sauce. When all was prepared, Clive returned to the rear of the van.

‘Okay, kid. Move.’

Barry unlocked the handcuffs and Clive pointed a gun at David’s head. He noticed that Clive had assumed his military posture. When that happened Clive had to be treated with caution.

‘Get over there.’

David went to the patch of ground indicated by Clive.

‘Catch!’

Barry threw a spade at him. The aim was poor and it landed in the bushes near the edge of the cliff. David turned to pick it up.

‘Freeze!’

A bullet dug a hole in the ground at his feet and David stopped instantly. It passed so close he wondered if Clive had meant to hit him. The man was either a very good shot or he’d intended to maim him ... and missed.

Barry retrieved the spade.

‘Get digging!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re going to dig a big hole for us, darling boy. We’re very concerned about the environment. We always bury our rubbish after we’ve had a party.’

David picked up the spade and held it lightly in one hand. It was a formidable weapon. He shuffled forward choking back tears.

Barry was unimpressed.

‘You’ve got two hands, kid. Use them.’

‘I can’t,’ David sobbed. ‘You’ve broken my wrist.’

He held up a hand, contorting it into an unnatural position.

‘You poor darling.’

Barry moved closer ... close enough for David to take him out. But he needed to deal with both of them together. He’d had this situation before. For want of a better idea, he peed in his pants.

Clive was quick to notice.

‘The darling boy’s pissing himself.’

David now had two hands on the spade.

Clive took a step forward and bent down to examine the wet patch developing around his groin.

‘Does the darling boy want ...’

The words died as the edge of the spade sliced through Clive’s neck. Blood sprayed and he tottered backwards. His gun fell and David pounced on it. It was his only mistake. He should have kept going and tackled Barry. Instead, he’d lost the initiative. Barry raised his gun. It was now too late for David to fire and some raw instinct took over. The muscles in his legs went into a spasm and he was propelled backwards over the edge of the cliff.

Bushes broke his fall. They stuck out and he crashed through them before coming to rest in a thicket of lantana. He lay still and looked around, taking in his surroundings. A rock face protected his rear. Barry was immediately above and

had a gun but he couldn't get into a firing position without exposing himself. For the moment David felt safe. He ran a hand over his body. There were cuts and bruises but no serious injuries.

He turned his attention to Clive's gun. It was his one defence. If Barry showed up, he'd blast him away. Hopefully, that wouldn't be necessary. If Barry had any sense he'd take off. It was a nice thought but Barry was a mindless yobbo. There was no telling what he would do.

He lay in the sweetly smelling lantana. It was oddly peaceful there. Barry could do what he liked. David had his own plans. When the sun went down he would melt away into the surrounding countryside. There was water in the creeks and enough bush food to keep him in good health. In a few days Rebecca would give her mobile to Humphrey. One way or another he'd get to a phone and call the number.

'Darling boy.'

A voice disturbed his thoughts.

'Don't think you can sneak away in the dark. I've a scope. I'll pick you off just like it was day.'

David hadn't heard him move. Barry must be good at what he was doing. He'd picked his way through the scrub, swiftly and silently.

'Smile ... darling boy.'

The voice came from further down the slope.

'I can see you, darling boy.'

David decided that he'd have to move or become a sitting target. Night was coming on fast and it would soon be dark. He hurled a rock in one direction and dashed in the other.

Fire pinned him down.

'I can still see you, darling boy.'

David remembered what Tim had said about close combat. Lie low or keep moving. Don't do anything in between or you're dead meat. He squirmed along on his belly, reached a fallen tree and saw Barry. A quick shot seemed in order. He missed and Barry returned fire.

'I've got you, darling boy. You might as well come out now and get it over. I'll give you a nice clean shot through the head if you do. Otherwise, I'll make sure you take a long time to die.'

David flattened himself against the ground. The sun was slipping below the horizon. In a few minutes it would be pitch dark. Barry would be able to see him with his scope but he wouldn't be able to see Barry.

A shot rang out.

It echoed back and forth and didn't sound like it had come from Barry's gun ... it had a heavier report. For a moment his mind went blank. Then he remembered what Tim had said. When in doubt, stick to the basic rules. That meant he had to keep moving. He squirmed forward and was preparing for his next move when a voice caused every muscle in his body to freeze.

'Relax, mate.'

It came from a short distance away.

'Take it easy.'

David turned his head and saw a figure silhouetted against the blood-red sky. He carried a rifle, which was pointing upwards, and wore a broad-brimmed hat.

'That mongrel won't give you anymore worries.'

He spoke slowly with the quiet delivery of the Australian bush. David waited for him to approach.

'I'll need you to give me a hand.'

His torch picked out a form in the bushes.

'We can't leave him there. You go down. I'll follow.'

David scrambled over the rocks and the man strode behind, negotiating the rough terrain with the ease of a city dweller walking to the office. They reached the bloodied form of Barry. The newcomer seemed indifferent to David's presence. His attention was on Barry and the lie of the land. He glanced back and forth between the corpse and a spot up the gully.

'Take a hold of this.'

He handed his torch to David and indicated a patch of ground.

'Point it down there.'

Everything seemed to be taking place in slow motion. David's veins were charged with adrenalin. He'd just escaped death. There were two dead bodies. One at his feet and the other by the grave he'd been digging. His instinct was to get away as fast as possible.

His companion had no such sense of urgency. He took a knife from his belt. David recognized it as a K-bar. Tim had one that he'd failed to return to the army. It was the sort of knife a professional used. David held the torch and watched as the K-bar probed the ground.

An eternity passed before the man found what he was looking for: a distorted piece of metal, still recognizable as a bullet. He slipped it in his pocket and turned to David.

'Okay. I'll take the shoulders. You take the legs.'

They carried Barry up the gully and dumped him beside the van. A Landcruiser was parked on one side. Clive's body lay on the other.

The man pointed to the gash across Clive's throat.

'Did you do that?'

David nodded.

'They said you were a smart kid.'

David didn't like being called 'kid' but appreciated the compliment.

'I'll dig. You hold the torch.'

He picked up the spade and handed David his rifle. It could have been interpreted as a trusting gesture. But, the rifle had been unloaded and David had surrendered the gun he'd taken from Clive.

He tried to put an age to the man. He was clearly older than himself but beyond that he had few ideas. The truth was he'd hardly seen him. He kept his hat pulled down over his head. Except for his voice, there was little to remember him by.

'Right, mate!'

He clambered from the hole and indicated it was time to dispose of the bodies. They wiped Barry's gun to remove fingerprints and pitched it in the hole with the two corpses. Everything was done with attention to detail. Nothing was left to

chance. Finally, the hole was filled and the Landcruiser used to pull a fallen tree over the gravesite.

David drove the van. He followed the Landcruiser and kept close behind as they left the high country and travelled through the night. After several hours, the road descended into a deep valley. Normally, it would have been dry. After the heavy rains, the creek was flowing fast.

The Landcruiser stopped and David pulled up behind it.

'Time for a bath.'

His rescuer walked round to the back of his vehicle.

'We need a change of clothes.'

David said he didn't have any.

'No worries, mate. Strip off and throw everything into the van.'

David hesitated. He was reminded of stories about Nazi Germany when people were delivered to extermination camps and told to take a shower. He watched the man go back to the Landcruiser and return with a bar of soap and a pile of garments.

'Is there anything you want to keep?'

David said he wanted to keep his dive watch.

'Is there blood on it?'

David said there was.

'Sorry. It'll have to go.'

David said it was an expensive watch with a serial number. If it were found, it could be traced back to him.

'Good thinking, mate.'

He reached out and David handed him the watch, which was examined under the glare of a flashlight before having its strap removed. The strap was thrown into the van and the watch returned to David.

'Give it a good scrub.'

David removed his clothes and cut and scrubbed his fingernails as instructed. His companion did the same, stripping off every item apart from his hat.

The man was a professional killer.

David could scarcely believe he was keeping the company of such a person and being complimented by him. His thoughts turned to Charlie and he wondered if he had been sucked into his world of violence ... that was chilling.

They changed into new clothes. David's denims were a perfect fit, which was surprising because he usually had trouble finding a pair that matched his build. And the boots were a good fit too. Whoever had launched the rescue mission had paid attention to detail and knew a lot about him.

He was tempted to ask questions but knew there was no point. They wouldn't be answered and anyone who asked them would be showing his ignorance. Professionals didn't provide information unless they had to. He slipped the dive watch into the pocket of his new jeans. Apart from his contact lenses, it was the sole thing that remained from his past. All the rest was memories.

'Gimme a hand, mate.'

They pushed the van into a hollow, set it alight and watched it burn. Then they got into the Landcruiser and headed west.

Forty hours later they reached a stretch of half-decent road on the Gulf of Carpentaria. Neither had slept for more than an hour at a stretch. For much of the way the journey had been a succession of creek crossings on little-used dirt roads. They'd developed a routine. One would wade across with a cable and the other would stay in the vehicle then they'd winch the Landcruiser across. They'd kept it up relentlessly, speeding on the better sections, grinding through mud most of the time, filling the tank with petrol from containers stacked at the rear.

In the light of day David was able to examine his companion. He was aged in his forties and clearly very good at what he was doing. But why did he do it? David wondered if the man had been seduced by the cult of the perfect warrior. He'd felt the fascination himself and had rejected it, only to pick it up again. Now he knew there was something profoundly perverse about it. He'd seen what it did to people. It was something to avoid. He'd got a glimpse of Charlie's world and was determined to stay out of it.

Towards late afternoon, they reached their goal. A sign above a rusty petrol drum announced that they had arrived at Kendall homestead. The Landcruiser pulled up. They shook hands. David was handed his bag. He hoisted it onto his back and set off wearily towards a group of dilapidated farm buildings.

Chapter 38

Monday 4 March.

The weather in Canberra had turned cold and police chief Bill Endicott was feeling the change in climate following three weeks' bird watching in Papua New Guinea. The usual pile of files awaited his attention. One was placed squarely on his desk with a note in his deputy's handwriting.

Could we please discuss?

He opened the file and spent the next two minutes speed-reading the contents. Then he placed his hands together in silent contemplation. The matter needed skilful handling. John Martin, his deputy, had made his contribution to the file in carefully worded language. Bill had no doubt there were things John wanted to say but not commit to writing. He reached for his phone and asked him to drop round as soon as possible.

John pulled up a chair.

'You've found the Pulnitz file?'

Bill nodded.

'We arrested Janet Pulnitz and held her for questioning,' John said. 'With her reputation it looked like an open-and-shut case ... almost smoking gun.'

'You say that our colleagues in the Narcotics Bureau took control the next day?'

'Sparrow got to the minister and convinced him the matter lay within his jurisdiction. We were given our marching orders.'

Bill Endicott removed his spectacles and tapped them lightly on his arm. 'Do you know why Sparrow's people didn't lay charges against Janet Pulnitz?'

'I guess they didn't want the case looked at too closely.'

Bill lent forward and smiled.

'That's the same comment Jim Peters made when I spoke to him in Brisbane. Sparrow moved in following the slaying of Milkovitz on the Barrier Reef. Jim had the case taken off his hands when he tried to question O'Neill.'

'You are talking about the galah who told that unbelievable story about how he shot Price then risked his life trying to get Milkovitz to shore?'

'That's him. Jim wanted O'Neill charged with contempt of court. The matter was sub-judice but that didn't stop the idiot from holding a media conference. If he was on my staff, he'd be looking for a new job.'

John Martin took a notebook from his pocket.

'We'd have sacked him but Sparrow nominated him for a bravery award. That's got to take some explaining.'

A silence followed. Both men knew where the conversation was leading. John spoke first. 'While you were away I had a look into O'Neill's background. He was recruited from the UK so I put a call through to my old friend Peter Bryson at Scotland Yard.'

He opened the notebook and read from it.

'Rodney McGraw O'Neill was recruited into the Hong Kong police. His father, Frank O'Neill, who was dismissed from the Liverpool police following charges of corruption, was a personal friend of Michael Holland, a senior figure in the former Hong Kong administration. When the Brits left Hong Kong, O'Neill returned to the UK and was put on a special placement scheme. He was one of the few officers who failed to secure a position with the UK police.'

John Martin looked up. 'I don't have to tell you about Mr Holland?'

'Not if he's the Mike Holland who's being sought on drug-related charges.'

'The same.' John snapped his book shut. 'And, he bent the rules to get O'Neill into the Hong Kong Police. The little shit didn't have the minimal school grades but he was recruited into this country as a senior narcotics officer.'

Bill Endicott's eyebrows rose on his domed forehead.

'What else have you discovered about our colleagues in the Bureau?'

John Martin returned the notebook to his pocket.

'Samantha Fischer can tell you more about that. She's got the Pulnitz woman staying with her. Janet is not shy when it comes to talking about her former boss.'

Chapter 39

Homestead.

David threw aside the mosquito netting that hung from a frame above his antique bed. The room was clean and equipped with a washbasin and towel. He cleaned the sleep from his eyes then inserted his contact lenses. Somewhere in the

rambling dilapidated building a shower craved his attention. He opened the door to the veranda.

It was a couple of hours past daybreak and the sun cut through the wooden blinds, assaulting his eyes with a criss-cross pattern of blinding glare and dark shadow. He put on his sunglasses and pulled on a hat. The house was perched on wooden stumps and steps from the veranda led to the undercroft below.

The undercroft was a common feature in old buildings in northern Australia. David had heard his grandfather talking about it. The stumps gave ample headroom and created a space where things could be stored. David had seen a laundry there when he arrived and suspected the shower was next to it.

He must have looked a comical sight as he descended the stairs in a broad-brimmed hat, sunglasses and bright-blue underpants of the ultra-brief sort.

A wolf whistle greeted him.

'G'day. Gorgeous.'

David raised his hat and smiled in her direction.

She was aged in her early forties.

'Can I get you a cuppa?'

'Not yet, thanks. I'm going to take a shower. There's half of North Australia under my fingernails and in my hair.'

'Second on the right,'

She pointed down the corridor.

'You'll need to take off the shades or you'll get lost.'

The shower was little more than a slab of cement below a plastic bucket with holes in the bottom. David stripped off and turned on the tap. The bucket filled and he basked beneath a pleasantly warm flow that got warmer and warmer ... then scalding hot.

He jumped back.

'Don't they have bore water where you come from?'

She had a cup of tea in one hand and a bottle of shampoo in the other.

'You'll need this.' She handed him the shampoo. 'You can't get a good lather with soap. The water's full of minerals.'

David squeezed shampoo over his hair and rubbed it into his scalp. She sat down, sipped her tea and watched his every move.

Her name was Noelene. They'd met the day before and she'd spent the evening with him while her husband, Daryl, played with his computer. She was a tall, lanky woman with long straight hair and leathery skin that looked like it had been hung out in the sun and dried. Her tight-fitting jeans revealed a figure that still retained some youthful features despite its weather-beaten appearance.

He had heard the story of her life. How she and Daryl had lost their savings in a crooked partnership and how they were trying to fight their way back with Daryl's latest venture ... crocodile farming.

As far as David could make out, the crocs weren't living up to expectations and Daryl was supplementing their income by other means. These included the provision of a place of refuge for lost souls like himself. He was clearly her most exciting refugee to date.

'You've got bubbles under your arm.'

He turned his back on her and poked his arms in the air, coming close to scalding himself as his hand touched the bucket. He wondered why no one had fitted a holding tank to give the water a chance to cool down.

'You've still got bubbles under your arm.'

David ignored her. He'd done enough to spice Noelene's dull existence for one day. He thanked her for the shampoo, wrapped a towel around his waist, returned the hat to his head and made for his room.

* * * * *

Five minutes later he was back outside fully dressed. He'd got no more than a glimpse of the place when he arrived and was keen to learn more about it. His main quest was the farm's communications system. It had to have one. Noelene and Daryl knew he was coming. But there were no telephone lines and Noelene had complained that the mobile network didn't reach them.

He couldn't see her but knew she was following his every move: no doubt out of lust rather than suspicion but that did not make him less cautious. He turned his back and made his way towards some pens Daryl had constructed for baby crocodiles.

They resembled paddling pools with chicken wire to stop the little crocs from jumping out. Lights hung above them at night and attracted moths which fell into the water and were gobbled up.

Daryl had explained the principle. It seemed that, in the early days of crocodile farming, people spent a lot of time preparing dainty morsels for the fussy palates of tiny hatchlings. Then someone noticed their fascination for insects. After that it was easy. You hung up lights and free grub was delivered under its own wing power.

The crocs looked like they had just emerged from their eggs. David wandered from pen to pen, counting. There were about 200 of the little reptiles. Daryl had told him how much the hides and flesh would fetch in three years.

David had not liked mathematics at school but had learnt enough to run the dive business. Aunt Grace had once remarked: "David can only do sums when there is a dollar sign in front of the numbers.". At the time, he had taken it as an insult. Now, he realized it was a compliment.

He did the sums and they didn't add up.

More pens caught his eye. They were much larger than the nursery pools and most were built from pieces of wood fastened together with wire and rusty nails. The crocodiles inside were big enough to be dangerous and their loss would be financially damaging if they escaped ... which seemed more than likely.

He'd seen enough. The crocodile farm was not economically viable and Daryl was a lazy slob who was letting the place fall into ruin. He pulled his hat down over his eyes and headed back the way he'd come. Reaching the corner of the farmhouse, he came across the wheel marks of a vehicle. They stood out prominently in the red soil and led to an expensive looking Volvo truck. Forty or more drums of diesel and an even larger quantity of aviation fuel were stacked nearby. A satellite dish was located a short distance away and a cable led from it to Daryl's window.

* * * * *

David went to bed early that evening and woke to the sound of possums in the roof. They'd disturbed him during the night and he'd slept with a pillow over his ears. He guessed that Noelene and Daryl had lived for so long in the tumbledown building that they scarcely noticed their furry lodgers.

He eyed the trapdoor in the ceiling. If he could get up into the roof space, he might be able to find another trapdoor and gain access to Daryl's office. That was his primary goal. Daryl was able to communicate with the outside world. The satellite dish was rusty and old fashioned but it evidently worked.

The door opened downwards and probably had a build-up of possum droppings on the upper side. David put a mat underneath and stood on a chair. A hard tap knocked back the bolt and the door fell open. A cloud of dust emerged. To his relief, most landed on the mat. He waited for it to settle, rolled up the mat and shook it over the veranda. Moments later he was back on the chair pulling himself up into the roof.

There was no sign of the possums and he wondered if they were hiding behind the tower-like structures that poked up amongst the beams. He recognized them as termite mounds. The small creatures had taken over the building and were turning it into a place of their own. He guessed the ceiling beams were eaten through. They didn't look safe and he doubted they would support his weight. The tops of the walls looked a far better bet. They ran between the rooms and one led straight to Daryl's office. David set out along it and heard voices.

They were coming from one of the bedrooms and belonged to Daryl and Noelene. His was little more than a murmur. Hers was of a far higher pitch and David could make out every word she said.

'You're a bloody fool if you think they won't find out.'

A murmur in reply from Daryl.

'I'm not talking about the diesel. They know you're using it. They're not worried about that. It's those other things you're doing. If they find out, we'll have big worries.'

Another murmur from Daryl.

'They don't want the police round here. They don't want the DPI round here. They don't want anyone round here.'

David crept forward and came to an old water tank. A family of possums lived inside and resented the intrusion. They hissed and tumbled out throwing up clouds of dust. He kept going and reached a point above the bedroom. He could hear both of them now.

'You might not like what I'm doing but you'll be happy enough to have the money,' Daryl said. 'You want to be out of here. We'll make our pile. Then we'll go and buy a pub down south.'

'We're not making it out of the crocs.'

'They'll come good.'

The pair continued to argue. David felt sorry for them. It was clear that Daryl had no business sense. He'd had a series of scatter-brained schemes and they'd all ended in disaster. Now he was venturing into operations that fell foul of the law. But it wasn't the law that worried Noelene. It was the people who employed them.

'They'll fix us, Daryl. If they think we're a risk they'll do away with us.' Her voice verged on hysteria. 'Have you ever thought how easy it would be for us to disappear? Who would care if we just vanished? Who knows we're here?'

Daryl tried to console her.

'The crocs are coming good.'

'No, Daryl. They're not going anywhere. You've got to accept that.'

'It's just a matter of time.'

'We don't have time, Daryl. They're coming tonight and we've got David here. I don't want him at risk. They'll be wanting to spend the night here before they fly on. They could see David. Can't you get that into your stupid head?'

'David's not part of what I'm doing with Kim.'

'I don't bloody care how he fits in,' Noelene screamed. 'I just don't want to see him hurt. He can spend the night with the old Dutchman. Have you been up there recently?'

'No. Why should I?'

'I worry about him. He's up there with only those two big dogs for company. I wonder what would happen if he was taken ill. My father knew an old man like him who died and when they found him he'd been half-eaten by his dogs.'

They continued to argue.

David made his way back to his room, hanging onto the roof joists, treading carefully, fearful that the house would collapse under him. He'd worked out where Daryl's office was located and had found the trapdoor leading to it. His excursion had been hugely successful. He'd learnt a lot about Noelene and Daryl and the nature of their operation.

* * * * *

Breakfast was enough to keep him going all day. Noelene piled his plate with rump steak and fried eggs garnished with a thick layer of tomato sauce. Daryl sat opposite and shovelled food into his mouth. He said he was going up the coast to catch fish for the crocs. David volunteered to help. He'd had few opportunities to speak to Daryl and wanted to see what he could learn from him.

He waited for Daryl to plough his way through a second helping and swig down another mug of sweet tea. Finally, when he had blown his nose and wiped his lips on a towel, they went outside. The Volvo truck was parked in the yard. Daryl clambered into the driver's seat. David got in beside him and eyed the expensive upholstery.

'It's a great rig you've got here, Daryl.'

'Yeah,' Daryl reached for the ignition. 'It cost a heap but you've got to spend to stay in business these days.'

True to form, Daryl was talking garbage. The vehicle didn't belong to him. It belonged to the people he was working for and it hadn't been bought for catching fish. David winced as Daryl pulled off in third gear. The man was incompetent beyond belief. He squeezed the truck through a gap in the fence, scraping the expensive bodywork, and headed towards the beach in the wrong gear and without the slightest regard for the rough terrain.

Huge termite mounds stuck up all around. Tim had told David about them. He said the individual nests were so massive the weight of their occupants equalled a

fully-grown cow or bull. The moral to this story was that the North Australian bush might seem barren but it contains a huge amount of protein in the form of termite larvae. If the worst came to the worst, you could always break into a nest and get a good feed. David hoped it would never come to that but was prepared to give it a try.

They left the termite mounds and drove onto the beach. The sand was firm and the Volvo kept up a steady pace. Daryl pointed to some spots where turtles had made their nests. 'I had a go at farming them once,' he said.

'How do you do that?'

'Same as with the crocs. You raid the nests and rear the hatchlings in tanks. Most would get taken by the gulls if you didn't so you're doing the little buggers a favour.'

'What happened?'

'They all died.' Daryl scratched his arse. 'Got some sort of disease. They're not like the baby crocs. They swim around in their own poo. They don't mind being crowded up. Turtles go to sea and swim around in clean water. They're not tough like what the crocs are.'

It occurred to David that they'd have to be tough to survive Daryl. He let him do the talking. Most of what he said was pure nonsense but that didn't matter ... there were gems of information amongst it.

'I'm multi-skilled,' Daryl crapped on. 'You have to be if you live out here. You can't just call in a tradesman every time something goes wrong. You have to fix it yourself. I do all the work on the electronics and on the aircraft. I was an aircraft maintenance engineer down south but we prefer to live up here.'

David was prepared to believe that Daryl had enough savvy to turn on the runway lights and put out the Doppler landing equipment but doubted if his expertise went much further than that.

Talk about aircraft led to another subject.

'You're going to have to spend the night away. We've got company. We'll be needing your room.'

'Who's coming?' David asked, hoping to catch Daryl off guard. But Daryl wasn't going to give anything away.

'Just some people.'

'They'll be flying in?'

Again, the question failed to elicit a response. Daryl grasped the steering wheel firmly with his hands and fidgeted awkwardly with his arse. He escaped his predicament by changing the subject.

'Take a look at that.'

He let go the steering wheel and pointed out to sea. David followed his gaze but all he saw was the glare of the sun on the water. Daryl stopped the truck and produced a pair of binoculars.

'Have a go with these.'

David knew the brand. It was one of the most expensive on the market. He put them to his eyes and adjusted the Polaroid filters.

'Not like that.' Daryl reached for the binoculars. 'You focus at the other end.'

David realized the man had not the slightest idea how to use them. He looked out to sea and saw a petrol drum. Nearby, a triangular fin was cutting the water in a slow circular motion.

‘Probably a tiger ... a big one.’

‘How d’ya know?’

‘Because that’s how they move.’

David guessed that Daryl intended to kill the tiger shark and take it back for the crocs. He didn’t approve. Sharks were in need of protection. He had often argued that in his dive classes ... usually with zero success. He turned to Daryl.

‘How are you going to kill it?’

Daryl reached under his seat and produced a rifle. David recognized it as a Lee Enfield 303 from the Second World War. His father used to have one and he’d been allowed to fire it under strict supervision. Father’s gun had been kept in top condition. Daryl’s looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in years.

‘This’ll sort him out.’

Daryl held the rifle as a child might hold a toy.

David threw open the cabin door and jumped out. He’d survived Barry’s attempts to shoot him. It would be ironic if he was killed by a chance shot from a moron with an antique gun.

He went round to the rear of the truck and helped Daryl unload an aluminium dinghy. They dragged it down to the water and David climbed in. He picked up the rifle.

‘You’ve got a round up the spout.’

‘Yeah, mate.’ Daryl got in beside him. ‘That’s so I won’t waste time if I sees a pig. You have to be quick or you miss ‘em.’

David slipped the round in his pocket and waited for Daryl to get the outboard started. After several tries it spluttered into uncertain life and they battled through the choppy waves to the drum. The scene was much as David expected. A large tiger shark had been caught on a huge hook, baited with the head of a feral pig. The trace was a steel cable of the sort used to winch boats onto trailers. It was attached to the drum via a length of chain. The shark was going in circles and near exhaustion. David watched cautiously.

Daryl reached for the gun.

‘I’ll soon put an end to the bastard.’

David compared the creature’s length to that of the dinghy and judged the shark to be twice as big. He’d seen one take a seal and knew how powerful they were.

‘Hold still,’ he cautioned. ‘Or we’ll end up in the water.’

He spoke slowly and calmly with the tone he used when talking to dive students in difficult situations. Daryl wasn’t impressed.

‘Gimme the gun.’

‘Sit down!’

David glared at him. ‘I know what a big tiger can do. It would only have to rub up against you and it would cut you to bits with its skin. It could break your back with a swipe from its tail. If it didn’t have that hook in its mouth it would bite you in half.’

A red haze enveloped him. He had visions of Tim floating in the sea, surrounded by blood. Then, the haze cleared and he saw Daryl huddled at the end of the boat. To his embarrassment, the rifle was pointing at him. David almost apologized. Then he decided that would be stupid.

‘Stay there.’

He loaded the gun and waited for the shark to come near. It was only a matter of time before it presented itself for an easy shot. He steadied himself as the stricken animal made a predictable turn ... and fired.

* * * * *

Back at the homestead, David helped Daryl cut up the big shark and put it in the freezer. The fish joined a miscellany of kangaroos, wild pigs and dingoes. Some looked like they’d been shot. Others had the appearance of road-kill victims and he wondered if they had died accidentally or been run over on purpose.

Daryl spoke knowledgably about conversion ratios. As far as David could make out the term referred to the amount of feed you had to give to an animal to get it to marketable size.

If Daryl was to be believed, the ratio was particularly good for crocs because they were cold-blooded and didn’t waste food keeping warm. Instead, they used it for building up body mass and the occasional burst of activity when they copulated or went off in search of a bite to eat. As a consequence you could increase the capital value of your stock for relatively little current expenditure.

David guessed Daryl was reciting from something he’d read on a web page. If it made any sense, it applied to the owners of chook farms who needed to dispose of rotting chicken carcasses and other unwanted offal. It didn’t refer to Daryl’s operation. The cost of refrigerating the carcasses was far more than the crocs would ever fetch.

The owners of the property were paying for Daryl’s lunatic scheme. David guessed they knew what was going on and had their own reasons for putting up with the nonsense. He remembered the conversation he had overheard in the roof. Noelene was worried that their employers might regard them as disposable. Her fears were probably justified. Unfortunately, they were about to fly in.

He went back into the farmhouse and gathered up his few belongings under Noelene’s supervision. She was obsessed by the possibility that he might leave something that would betray his presence.

‘You’ll be alright with the old Dutchman.’ She thrust a plastic bag into David’s hand. ‘I’ve got these for him. Say there’s no need to pay. They are a present.’

* * * * *

David placed the bag with his gear in the Volvo and clambered in beside Daryl. The back of the truck was still stained with the blood of the shark and the smell penetrated the cab.

‘I’d get that scrubbed out if I were you,’ he said sarcastically. ‘Or your posh visitors might wonder what you’ve been using it for.’

Daryl said nothing. Since the incident with the gun, he’d adopted a subservient attitude towards David ... and David was happy to leave it that way. He sat beside him in silence and watched out of the window as they drove along a ridge dotted

with cliffs and steep gullies. The track ended in a natural amphitheatre, strewn with large boulders. Daryl stopped and sounded the horn.

A minute passed and a figure emerged from a cleft in the rocks. He was tall and skinny and wore a single item of clothing: a pair of baggy shorts that looked as if they'd been handed down by a grossly overweight person such as Daryl.

It was the old Dutchman. He no doubt had a name but no one ever used it. He spoke English with a slight Dutch accent. Apart from that, his speech was entirely Australian. He took the plastic bag which David gave him and led him 'indoors'.

Indoors turned out to be different from anything that David had imagined. He'd had visions of a variety of tumbledown dwellings. This exceeded his expectations. The Dutchman lived underground.

He'd taken a cave and enlarged it. David was impressed. A cool breeze blew through the habitation, coming in through a cleft in the rocks and exiting somewhere at the rear of the complex. Light entered through irregularly shaped windows constructed from bottles packed together with clay. The walls had been whitewashed and the overall effect was pleasing.

But, it was far from clean. The Dutchman wasn't coping anymore. A once cosy dwelling was falling apart. David understood Noelene's fear that he would die one day and be eaten by his dogs. He watched the old fellow unpack the plastic bag she had prepared for him. It was like seeing a child open a Christmas present.

'Noelene says you're to throw away the razor blades when you've used them. You're not to try to sharpen them. She'll get you some new ones.'

The old man nodded. 'She's a nice young woman. Very kind and considerate. I don't know how she puts up with that husband of hers.'

David told him about the incident with the gun and how he'd taken it from Daryl and shot the shark himself. That was evidently something in his favour.

'How old are you?'

David said he had just turned twenty-one.

'Hmm...' the old man nodded. 'I was once your age.'

He seemed about to say more but his mind wandered and he went outside and shouted to his dogs. David was keen to get him talking. He liked to hear old people reminisce. It was like taking a trip back into the past. But it wasn't just history that interested him. He wanted to learn more about the homestead and the people who owned it. He had no doubt there were things the Dutchman could tell him ... if he was prepared to talk.

He unpacked the meal and laid it out on a table made from slabs of polished timber. There were iced beers and a bottle of whisky. Noelene said he shouldn't produce the whisky until after the old man had eaten. David returned it to the bag and poured the beer. The sun set and it was suddenly dark. He lit a candle and soon had some light on the scene.

The old man picked at his food, eating very little. Most was handed to his dogs who had an appetite for curried egg, smoked ham and anchovies. David guessed the animals were being treated to some of the delicacies prepared for the mysterious visitors. He wondered if the Dutchman knew who they might be. The meal ended and he pulled out the whisky bottle. The old man had shown little enthusiasm for the beer but his eyes lit up when he spied the amber liquid.

'You're a good lad.'

David poured two glasses.

The Dutchman took his and raised it to eye level.

‘Good health.’

David wetted his lips but drank nothing. He continued to fill the old man’s glass and was soon hearing his life history. He’d been born in what was once the Dutch East Indies and had never set foot in Holland. His family had been interned when the Japanese invaded Java and he’d escaped to Timor. From there he’d made a perilous journey to Australia where he joined the army.

The horrors of war had taken a heavy toll. David knew about such people. His grandfather and Uncle Charlie spoke about them. In the First World War they were described as “shell shocked”. In subsequent conflicts, terms like “battle fatigue” had been used to describe their condition.

Some people could withstand conflict. After what had happened, David knew he was one of them. He gained no pride from that. He was aware of how much he had changed since he’d come to terms with Tim’s death. He’d killed a man and helped a professional killer dispose of the corpse. Earlier that day, he’d used a gun to intimidate Daryl. Once more he wondered how Charlie had been drawn into a life of violence. People often commented on how similar they were.

The whisky had got to the old man and David wondered if he should stop him drinking. He’d had virtually none of the bottle himself and it was now almost empty. After some reflection, he decided not to worry and was about to pour another glass when a plane passed overhead.

‘What’s that?’

‘I didn’t hear nothing.’

‘The plane,’ David held out the bottle. ‘You must have heard it.’

‘No, young man. When you’ve lived here as long as I have you learn not to hear certain things.’

David didn’t doubt what the old fellow was trying to tell him. He thrust the bottle into his hands and went outside. A short run took him to the edge of the ridge. From there he could see the airstrip. It was illuminated by flashing beacons. The plane landed and he saw the lights of the Volvo as Daryl went to meet it. He saw them again when Daryl took the visitors to the homestead.

Chapter 40

Memories.

Noelene was in the stable, polishing a saddle. Her unwelcome guests had flown off and David was back at the homestead following his overnight stay with the old Dutchman. She looked up expectantly when he strode through the door.

‘Hi! Gorgeous!’

There was a note of passion in her voice and David wondered what her next move would be. She dabbed oil on the leather.

'Daryl's gone off to get some baby crocs. He won't get back for at least two hours. We could get to know one another better while he's gone.'

Her fingers caressed the saddle, running back and forth along the pommel in a way David found difficult to ignore.

'You said I could exercise the old horse.'

'It's midday, David. Too hot to go out. You need to stay in the shade ... wait for the sun to get lower ... get in a bit of exercise with me.'

'I thought I'd take the horse down to the paddock. Have a lie-down under the trees.'

She removed a burr from his shirt.

'There's plenty of shade here, David.'

Her fingers slide across his chest. The smell of saddle oil was overpowering. David wondered if she'd got high on it. Her hand slipped inside his shirt and she began to work it up and down with the same attention she'd been giving to the saddle. It slipped lower and David decided he'd already done enough to ease the burden of Noelene's uneventful life. He grabbed the saddle and headed outside to where an old stallion was tethered in the shade of a pandanus palm.

Noelene followed him. To his relief she stopped pestering him for sex and started to speak about the horse.

'It's his,' she said taking the saddle from him. 'I cleaned it up so we could use it today.'

David patted the horse and it nuzzled up against him.

'He likes you, David.'

'Who does he belong to?'

'One of the owners. He used to come up for holidays but he's old now and hasn't been here for years.'

The horse licked David's face.

'He thinks he knows you ... like you're an old friend.'

David had ridden a few times before. Once on a trip to the Snowy Mountains with Tim and many years earlier when he was a small child. Noelene hoisted him up and checked that the harness was properly in place.

The horse led the way, leaving the paddock and entering the road the Volvo had taken on its way to the airstrip. David was content to let it plod along. There was no need to hurry. They were going in the right direction. He pulled his hat down to shield his eyes and yawned. He'd become used to taking a siesta. It made sense in the tropics. In the middle of the day it was too hot to work. The sensible thing was to sleep.

He started to doze in the saddle and was soon drifting in and out of sleep, nodding off then waking when his head dropped forward. The landscape drifted by. Things seemed familiar ... as if from a distant past ... not that he recognized anything. It just felt like he'd been there before.

There were pandanus palms beside the road and the horse tramped through their fallen fronds making a sharp crunching noise that he remembered from a long time ago. Mangroves appeared and he heard things splashing in the water. His head slumped forward and he fell into a deeper sleep.

The horse grew bigger and he felt very small on its huge back. Where was Charlie? He remembered a sunhat. He'd wanted to take it off but Charlie kept

putting it back like it was a game. Past and present were entwined. The sun hurt his eyes. It had always been like that. He had sensitive eyes. His mother had fussed over him with a bonnet. Charlie found a proper sunhat and sunglasses and walked beside him on the horse. They kept playing the game. David removed the sunhat and Charlie put it back on.

He awoke and looked around. The horse had stopped in front of an old house with an iron roof and verandas. It looked familiar, like in the dream. But it wasn't as big as it was then and it didn't smell of fresh paint. The windows were broken and the door was hanging off its hinges. David got down from the horse and walked to the steps.

The smell of bird was overpowering. He went inside and looked around. The rooms were stacked with cages. Most were empty but the droppings in them were fresh. He was reminded of the conversation he had overheard between Noelene and Daryl. She had warned him that his illegal activities could cost them dearly.

The point of the warning was not that they should fear the police but they should fear the people they worked for. The people who employed Noelene and Daryl would not tolerate an employee who attracted unwanted attention through a venture into petty crime.

David identified the remaining birds as juvenile cockatoos. Tim had once pointed to a flock of them in the Brindabella Ranges outside Canberra, saying they would be worth a million bucks if they were taken to Tokyo or New York. The trade in native birds was illegal. David had strong views about people who engaged in it. He used to regard them as monsters. Now he realized that some were pathetic characters like Daryl.

He went outside, found the horse and led it by the bridle. The airfield was clearly visible from the Dutchman's cave and he'd kept it under observation while he was staying with the old man. It was located on a narrow spit of land between the mangroves and the ridge. The runway was roughly graded and marked by landing lights. A shed at one end had satellite dishes on its roof.

He reached the airstrip and made for the shed. Like the Volvo, it was one of the few things that looked new and not falling to pieces. He had tools with him. He'd put them in the saddlebag figuring they would be needed to gain access. When he got to the shed they weren't needed. The door had been forced at some time and was held shut by a piece of string. He untied it and went inside.

The equipment was much as expected. He'd seen it on a familiarization course run by one of the emergency services organizations. Amongst other things, it could access the aviation communications channels. His intentions were far more modest. He planned to use it to call Rebecca's mobile.

The power came on when he hit the switch on the control panel. Seconds passed and the screen flickered into life. The communications channels were displayed and he studied them for a while before realizing he was wasting his time. A satellite phone was on the desk, staring him in the face.

After that things went with a rush.

He entered Sue Lynne's number, got her answering machine and told it where he was and how he'd got there.

Then, he phoned Rebecca's mobile. The dialling tone rang and he waited. A minute passed and Humphrey answered. He sounded puffed. David told him what

had happened and gave his exact location, reading out the latitude and longitude from a piece of paper stuck to the wall above his head.

Humphrey hinted that he and Janet were government agents and had proof of his innocence. 'We'll come and get you,' he said. 'Stay where you are, keep a low profile and keep in touch.'

Chapter 41

Aunt Grace.

Kirstin entered the church and looked around. The weather was unseasonably cold and she wished she'd put on a warmer coat. Her back was aching and a touch of arthritis added to her general feeling of unease. Humphrey and Janet had gone north in an off-road vehicle that they'd hired at considerable expense. Both had abandoned all thought of leaving the country and were intent on rescuing David who had phoned two days earlier.

She had spent the night alone, sleeping on an old camp bed in the garage with Janet's gun and a telephone beside her. Common sense told her it was no way for someone of her age to behave.

It was Sunday and she was at church, partly out of religious conviction but also to keep in touch with Cecilia Paget. She had arrived early and gone to the small pew that she and Cecilia favoured. It was beside a pillar and had room for only two people. The organ started and Kirstin anticipated Cecilia's arrival.

To her annoyance, a man in a dark suit suddenly appeared beside her. She had seen him before. His features were distinctive: domed forehead and heavy spectacles. She recognized him as a regular member of the congregation.

'May I join you?'

She tried to say that she was expecting a friend but he squeezed past and held out his hand before she had time to reply.

'Kirstin, I hoped you would be here.'

There was something very professional about his approach. She recognized it from her childhood. Her Lutheran father was adept at it. It was about winning souls. She wasn't a member of the Anglican congregation and expected an attempt to recruit her. She shook his hand and prepared for a silly conversation in which she would express her commitment to the ecumenical spirit.

'Don't you remember me?'

She smiled abstractly.

'We met in the Brindabellas.'

Kirstin cast her mind back to an excursion with the bird watching club.

'Oh. Yes. You're the owl man. You arrange the field trips.'

Bill Endicott smiled. 'I'm also a police officer and I have major responsibilities for the maintenance of law and order in this city. I returned from vacation a few days ago and was deeply concerned when I learnt of the terrible attack on your grandchild.'

'It was very distressing,' Kirstin replied.

As they spoke, Cecilia Paget burst into the church, accompanied by two elderly people. Kirstin recognized George Paget and guessed the other was Aunt Grace. She was shocked by how old they looked.

The service began with a hymn. When it ended they sank down on their knees. Bill Endicott slid forward and spoke in a hushed voice. 'I have reason to believe that you have information which could be of value if placed in the correct hands.'

'We have information which conflicts with certain official announcements,' Kirstin replied guardedly.

'Does this information originate with your son's former employer?'

'It does.'

'You are of course aware that whereas both Mr Sparrow and I are in the employ of the Federal Government and both report to the same minister, we operate quite separately from one another.'

'I am.'

'I have a responsibility to report matters of concern to my minister.'

'I understand that.'

'The bird watching club meets at Casuarina Sands today. I shall be there immediately after the service. I assume you will be there too. We could discuss your concerns without fear of interruption.'

They talked again after the service. Kirstin was anxious that there should be no confusion over the rendezvous. Bill Endicott drew a small map. As he was doing so, Cecilia Paget came rushing forward.

'Kirstin. Daddy and Aunt Grace would so like to see you.'

She appeared unaware of the police chief's presence.

'Do come and say hullo. Daddy would so like to meet you again.'

Bill Endicott slipped away and Kirstin trailed after Cecilia. Aunt Grace was in a pew and Sir George was standing beside her. He held out a hand as Kirstin approached.

'You're looking very distinguished, my dear. I would hardly have recognized you as that young Danish tearaway I recruited all those years ago.'

He turned to introduce Grace.

'This is Charles' wife. You surely remember my son, Charlie.'

Kirstin could scarcely believe that the aged woman was married to someone of her own generation.

Grace reached out a bony hand.

'You're the grandmother of that poor little girl who was so horribly violated. I can't tell you how much I was upset. As I said to George, I just can't understand how such a thing could have happened ... that awful, awful man.'

George moved to comfort her.

'Now. Now. Gracie. You mustn't blame yourself.'

The old woman's head jerked to one side and her towering headpiece slid forward. Cecilia pushed it back. Grace's lips moved as if searching for words. Eventually she found them.

'Do you know William Endicott well?'

Kirstin's mind was still occupied by George's last remark and she failed to take in the question.

'Who?'

'Gracie means that policeman chap you were talking to just now.'

'You mean the owl man? Yes. We're in the same bird watching society.'

Grace's face took on a set expression.

'Ah. That's why you were speaking to him.'

Her head dropped forward and she fell silent.

George placed an arm about Kirstin's waist. Thirty-five years earlier she would have thought he was making a pass. He spoke in Chinese, calling her Cherry Blossom (a reference to her Danish name). He spoke about Charlie. He clearly knew they had been lovers. It was a confused conversation. The old man was alert to events but seemed unable to cope with them. The outcome was indecisive. She kissed him on the cheek and he seemed cheered by that. Her last view of them was of two elderly people gazing at her apprehensively as she made her way to her car.

* * * * *

The bird watching group assembled at Casuarina Sands. Bill Endicott arrived with his wife who wandered off to speak to friends, leaving him free to approach Kirstin. The encounter looked casual. Only a professional would have suspected something different.

'Kirstin. You asked about the barking owls which are nesting downstream.'

She picked up her binoculars. 'Do you think we might see them?'

'I'd be delighted.' He waved to his wife. 'I'm just going to show Kirstin the screaming women, darling.'

They set off.

'What was that about screaming women?'

'Its popular name is the screaming woman bird.'

Kirstin considered the remark.

'I thought it barked.'

'Most of the time it does,' Bill agreed. 'But on occasions, during the mating season, when it gets excited, it makes a noise like a screaming woman. There are accounts of people phoning the police to report a rape in progress.'

'Perhaps they're not too far from the point,' Kirstin suggested.

'Yes,' Bill chuckled. 'But it would fall outside the jurisdiction of my people. Maybe it's something the bird group should investigate.'

They scrambled over boulders and reached a point opposite a dead tree.

Kirstin raised her binoculars and looked in the direction of the tree. She was adjusting focus when he next spoke.

'What do you want to tell me?'

She leant forward and peered at the tree.

'We think we've uncovered major irregularities in the conduct of the Narcotics Bureau.'

'Could you elaborate?'

'We have reason to believe that David Paget and Timothy Price were not involved with drugs. We have evidence which suggests they were tricked into a compromising situation.'

'You think they were set up?'

'Yes.'

Kirstin gave an account of everything that had happened. She ended with a comment about her sleeping arrangements. 'I spent last night in the garage on a camp bed with an unlicensed gun by my side.'

'Why the garage?'

'It's the safest room in the house and the last place an intruder would expect to find me.'

Bill Endicott took a notebook from his pocket. 'I shall arrange for more appropriate protection. I shall also look into the possibility that you be seconded to a special team. We need to formalize your role and that of the other two members of your group.'

He returned the notebook to his pocket.

'I assume you have some ideas about how the investigation should proceed.'

Kirstin nodded. 'Tomorrow I shall visit a former member of George Paget's section. She was his secretary for many years and is living in a retirement home near Batemans Bay. If I can use my powers of persuasion, I might get her to talk about old times.'

He wrote down a telephone number.

'Use this to keep in touch. I shall have suitable protection in place by this evening. If you're followed, lead them in circles and wait for my people to take appropriate action.'

* * * * *

There were many routes from the Hansen residence in Canberra to the seaside resort of Batemans Bay. One was straightforward. The rest involved many twists and turns. Kirstin chose one of the latter. She went towards Mount Stromlo then back towards Red Hill. The car trailing her followed slavishly and was still on her tail when two police vehicles moved into blocking positions and ordered the occupants out. It was her cue to stop moving in circles and head for the coast.

The Illawarra Residential Home is a few miles from Batemans Bay. It was afternoon when Kirstin got there. She found her friend in the garden.

'Elsie. They told me you were out here.'

The old woman removed her spectacles and looked up.

'Kirstin. I was so pleased when you phoned.' She peered at her. 'My! You have changed. And, whatever happened to that lovely Danish accent?'

They embraced and Kirstin helped her sit down.

'So. You're writing a history of George's Special Investigations Section. Don't you need security clearance for that sort of thing?'

'It's not going to be that sort of history, Elsie. It's going to be about people. Not about what they did.'

They talked about old times. Elsie had been George Paget's personal secretary and had continued in that role when he moved to the Prime Minister's office. Kirstin made copious notes. It was a slow and tedious process. Elsie talked endlessly and, after a while, the conversation came round to the subject of Charles Paget and his marriage to Grace.

'I met her the other day,' Kirstin remarked. 'I couldn't believe how old she looked. She's more George's age than Charlie's.'

'She looked much younger when she married him.'

'We all did thirty-five years ago, Elsie.'

'No. That's not what I mean.' Elsie paused to gather her thoughts. 'I mean she looked much younger than her age then. She'd had a facelift. I think that's what you call it. One of those operations film stars have. That's what people said. At any rate, she looked far younger than she really was.'

'I still can't get used to Charlie with an older woman,' Kirstin ventured. 'I went out with him a few times.'

'Oh. Yes. I remember George talking about Charlie and the Danish girl. I think he fancied you himself. He always was a bit of a ladies' man.'

She pulled at the ends of her shawl.

'The truth is he fancied Grace. They'd had a relationship going for years.'

A young woman came with a tray of tea and biscuits. The interruption distracted Elsie and she digressed into an account of a visit she'd made to a North Queensland tea plantation. Kirstin struggled to bring the conversation back to the topic of Grace.

'She'd have been pregnant at the time of the marriage.'

'What was that, my dear?'

'Grace would have been three months pregnant when she married Charlie.'

'Oh. She was. But not with Charlie's child.'

'Are you saying George was the father?'

'Well, my dear. I know I shouldn't be talking about this but they're all long dead.'

Kirstin chose not to remind Elsie that they were still alive and she'd just told her that she'd met them only recently.

'George's wife, Philippa, was mentally ill, poor dear,' Elsie continued. 'She had a companion, a nurse if you like, and they occupied a wing of that big house. George saw a lot of Grace. She owned the Royal, you know. It was one of Sydney's top hotels.'

Elsie rambled on, recounting how Grace became pregnant.

'I don't know who came up with the idea. At any rate, Charlie married Grace and immediately abandoned her, leaving George to care for his daughter-in-law and child. It was all rather clever. Grace became Mrs Paget and, when Philippa died, people started to call her Lady Paget, thinking she was George's wife.'

'You wouldn't have a photograph of Grace as a young woman?'

Elsie said she didn't. She looked tired. It was spotting with rain. A man arrived with a wheelchair. Kirstin helped Elsie into it and said goodbye.

* * * * *

A Rolls Royce was standing in the driveway of the Paget residence when Kirstin got back to Canberra. She was reminded of visits to the house thirty years earlier when Cecilia's mother was still alive. The vehicle and the uniformed chauffeur were like apparitions from the past.

She parked her small car behind the Rolls and asked if it would be in the way. The elderly chauffeur looked up from a racing guide and said that Sir George and Lady Paget would not be going out again that day.

She went to the porch and reached for the bell. Before she could ring it the door flew open and she was confronted by Cecilia's anxious face.

'Kirstin. I thought it might be you.'

'I've brought back some of the photographs you kindly lent me.'

You needn't have but do come in.'

Cecilia moved to one side and Kirstin entered the hallway. Her eyes settled on a family picture on a small table beneath a hat stand. She had seen it before and was determined to have it. Cecilia pushed past.

'Daddy and Aunt Grace are upstairs. They do feel the cold. I must go up and turn on the heating.'

Aunt Grace?

Kirstin pondered the term as Cecilia's footsteps receded. The Pagets certainly had a casual approach to family names. From a legal point of view Grace was Cecilia's sister-in-law. From the de facto point of view she was her stepmother. From the Paget point of view she was Aunt Grace.

It was typical of George Paget and the world of espionage that had occupied so much of his life. Kirstin remembered something he'd once said to her. It was shortly after he'd recruited her and her knowledge of English was imperfect.

'Mirrors within mirrors within mirrors.'

She'd struggled to understand what he was saying and he'd explained it to her.

'You make it so confused that only a huge expenditure of time and effort can uncover the truth.'

The Chinese communists were accomplished in the use of mirrors and George Paget was quite an expert himself.

Kirstin had the family portrait in her handbag and was searching in a draw for a photo album when Cecilia's footsteps descended the stairs. She found the album and thrust it under her coat.

'Kirstin. I'm so sorry. I would have liked to have invited you to stay for a while but it's daddy. He's so distressed. I just don't know what to do.'

Kirstin almost offered assistance then remembered that she'd got what she came for. 'I won't impose on you anymore.' She looked at her watch. 'I really must be getting home. Give my regards to your father and Aunt Grace.'

* * * * *

A police car stood in the road outside the Hansen house and two uniformed police officers were visible through the dining room window. Kirstin recognized one as Janet's friend, Samantha. The other was an athletic-looking young man. They came out to meet her.

'I thought this was meant to be a low-profile operation,' Kirstin whispered. 'We seem to have moved to high profile.'

'You can speak normally, Mrs Hansen,' Samantha said. 'The house has been debugged.'

They went inside. Kirstin glanced at fragments of ceiling insulation on the hall carpet and guessed that a team of surveillance experts had been crawling about in the roof space.

'There's been a bust-up between the Owl and the Bird,' Samantha said.

Kirstin guessed the Owl was police chief Endicott and the Bird was narcotics chief, Sparrow.

'The car that's been trailing you had two of the Bureau's men in it,' Samantha continued. 'Our guys took them into custody when they failed to show proper identification. The Bird was furious and put a call through to the AG's office. The Owl was called in to explain. We don't know exactly what happened but Sparrow didn't have it all his own way and our people were sent round to remove the bugs.'

'So, it's Round One to the Owl.'

'It would seem so, Mrs. Hansen.'

Then we must help him win Round Two.'

'Do you have anything in mind?'

'I might,' Kirstin removed the Paget photo album from her bag. 'You never know what we might discover with a little help from our friends.'

* * * * *

Mary Pulnitz had coffee brewing when they arrived. She picked up the percolator from the stove and led Kirstin through into the living room where her son, Alan, was loading a program into his laptop computer. He seemed less than pleased to see them.

'I hope you realize this could cost me my job, Mother.'

'If you think your job is more important than clearing your sister's good name,' Mary scowled at him, 'then I don't want anymore to do with you.'

Alan's lips narrowed and he turned to Kirstin.

'What is it you want me to do?'

'Humphrey told me about that program you have. The one used to identify people from photographs taken when they were much younger.'

'Yes,' Alan replied testily.

Kirstin took two photographs from her handbag. One was of Rosie in the company of Doris and a male client at the Island View Hotel. The other was of Mrs Rosalind Baker in the company of a state premier at the opening of a new rural hospital.

'Which two do you want me to compare?'

'I surely don't have to tell you that, Alan.'

For a moment it seemed as if he was going to argue but a look from his mother brought him into line. Alan scanned the two prints and identified Rosie and Rosalind as the two persons who had to be compared.

Kirstin watched as the images were presented on the computer screen. Alan placed the cursor on eyes, nose, chin and other prominent features and clicked away methodically.

'Okay. Let's see what we've got.'

He clicked again and a diagram appeared: a collection of irregular, coloured blobs. Two points flashed next to one another.

'One point marks Rosie's position,' Alan explained. 'The other refers to Rosalind. You will notice that they are very close.'

'What do the coloured regions signify?' Kirstin asked.

Alan clicked on the blue region.

'Someone like yourself, who is of northern European ancestry, is likely to be placed in this region.' He moved the cursor to a green area. 'If, on the other hand, your ancestors came from China, you'd probably be found somewhere round here.'

'Rosie and Rosalind are way off to one side,' Kirstin said.

Alan reached for the mouse. 'They're there because they have unusually long heads.' He clicked and a map of northeast Asia flashed on the screen.

Kirstin was entranced. Tong Yee's family came from Manchuria. He said in his journal that Rosie had inherited the Yee family looks. She delved in her handbag and produced a photograph of Tong Yee. Alan scanned it and Tong Yee's position flashed up near Rosie and Rosalind.

Alan sat back. 'Less than one per cent of the inhabitants of our entire planet would be found anywhere near those three points.'

'Do you think they're related?'

Alan shrugged. 'The value of these tests is not to prove that a young person of one appearance would age into someone of another. It has been developed to reject possibilities. For example, if you had a young person here,' he stabbed a finger at the screen, 'there's no way they could age to over there. The measurements are made on well-defined skeletal features and they don't change with age.'

Kirstin fully understood Alan's concern. His attitude was defensive. He'd spent hours defending forensic evidence in court and had learnt the need for discretion. That meant you needed a bolt hole. The best ploy was to speak in broad generalities and not be over positive about anything. Her problem was to find the truth.

'Do you think Rosie and Rosalind are the same person?'

Alan shrugged. 'Possibly. The chance of two randomly chosen persons being so alike is less than one per cent ... unless they both come from Manchuria.'

'If they both come from Australia?'

'Then it's much less than one per cent.'

Kirstin reached in her handbag and produced another photograph.

'I'd like you to pass an opinion on this handsome lady.'

Alan examined the photograph, which showed a very drunk Charlie standing beside a smartly dressed Grace at their wedding reception.

'She's had facial surgery.'

'She had a facelift,' Kirstin said.

'More than a facelift!'

Alan scanned the photograph and brought it up on the screen.

'There's been an expensive attempt to change her appearance. The scars are still visible. You can see where her eyes were rounded. It was a popular surgical procedure in Japan when women wanted a Western look.'

'Do you think she's the same person as Rosie and Rosalind?'

Alan superimposed the three images then separated them.

'I'll give you Rosie and Rosalind. They share a couple of moles.'

'And the other lady?'

'I'm not so sure about her. The moles are gone but, with the surgery she's undergone, that wouldn't be surprising.' He brought up Grace's position in the spot diagram and it flashed beside the other two women.

Kirstin beamed with satisfaction. 'Rosie, Rosalind and Grace. They're the same person ... aren't they, Alan?'

'They resemble one another,' he replied with characteristic caution. 'Two people can resemble one another but that does not make them the same person.'

'Oh! Come! Alan!'

Kirstin rounded on him.

'You said it was a most unusual face. You said the chance of those three points lying so close together was minuscule.'

He sounded further notes of caution but Kirstin was in no mood to listen. Alan always added an escape clause to everything he said. It was a mindset he had developed from too many court appearances.

* * * * *

The minder went into the living room to watch TV and Kirstin went upstairs to her study with Samantha. 'I do believe the end is in sight,' she told the young police officer. 'We just have to nudge it along a bit.'

She took an envelope from her desk and addressed it to Sir George and Mrs Grace Paget. Then, on a piece of handmade paper, she wrote the Chinese characters which Tong Yee had used when referring to his granddaughter (Magnolia Blossom otherwise known as Rosie) and her roguish companion (The Knave).

Below this she wrote a short sentence in Chinese, saying it was in the interests of their two grandchildren that they tell everything they knew to the appropriate authorities. She signed with the Chinese character for Cherry Blossom, which was the name she had used when reporting to George as a raw recruit in his Intelligence Unit.

Kirstin placed the note in the envelope and gave it to Samantha to deliver. The police officer wished her goodnight and Kirstin sank back in her chair. Things had fallen into place. She had long suspected that the Chinese character for Knave could also be rendered as Little Page or Paget. It was a pun that Tong Yee would have enjoyed.

She pictured the two together in the Island View Hotel. Handsome George and Rosie with her striking features. The Americans had arrived and, to quote a popular saying of the day, they were overpaid, oversexed and over here. It was a great opportunity for two like-minded young people to seize the initiative. Fortunes could be made by those who didn't care how they did it.

Kirstin brewed a cup of cocoa and went back to her desk. She nursed the cup and scanned the Paget album, thumbing through the pages. Towards the middle she found photographs of Cecilia at her expensive boarding school. Spotty-faced teenagers in silly uniforms. Later photographs showed Cecilia in a ball gown with a young man in a dark suit and bow tie.

Kirstin continued to flip the pages until she came to a wedding photograph and received an unpleasant surprise. She had always assumed that David was illegitimate. The family name was so unusual. The chance of a Miss Paget meeting a Mr Paget and falling in love seemed minuscule. She had imagined a shy and awkward Cecilia being seduced on her first date and becoming pregnant.

A cutting from The New York Times told a different tale. It announced the wedding of Captain James Paget to his second cousin, Miss Cecilia Paget. A more recent cutting reported the death in action of Colonel James Paget and gave a glowing tribute, describing him as an exemplary officer. Kirstin's confidence took a nosedive. David had told her that his father had been killed by an insurgent's bullet. She'd assumed it was the family's way of covering up the true circumstances of his birth.

She felt very foolish. Perhaps she wouldn't have jumped to such an untested conclusion if she hadn't known the people involved and experienced an unplanned pregnancy herself. Whatever the explanation, her thinking had lacked the solid professional rigor she liked to associate with her work. She wondered what other mistakes she had made.

The album contained photographs going back over 100 years. Kirstin recorded names and dates and a clear picture emerged. She wondered why she had not seen it before.

The answer no doubt lay in the Pagets' insistence on calling everyone Auntie or Uncle regardless of their true relationships. And there was the further complication of Cecilia marrying her second cousin. Plus the cunning ruse by which Charlie married his father's mistress (Rose aka Grace) and passed himself off as the father of their child, Harald. Kirstin sketched out the Paget family tree and it was surprisingly simple.

See Annex 3

Everything had fallen neatly into place. She got up and prepared for bed. Then doubts flooded back.

Rose aka Grace ... it was a vital detail.

She was certain about Rosie and Rosalind but what about Rosie and Grace? As Alan said, two people might look alike but that doesn't make them the same person. A feeling of panic swept over her then, from the recesses of her mind, she heard George talking to her over the years.

It happened in the sixties. She'd been sent out on a rushed assignment and had swapped her miniskirt for more formal attire. The target was a Hong Kong businessman and the place was the Canberra Theatre. She located the target and whispered the secret message in his ear ... only to encounter an almost identical man a few minutes later.

What should she do?

In the end, she went to George and told him she'd probably boobed. He'd remained his usual relaxed self, admitting that he'd not had time to prepare her for the mission.

'Let's look at it this way, my dear,' he said. 'If you got the wrong man, there's probably a toy salesman wondering why a mysterious Western woman whispered a strange message to him. On the other hand, if you got the right man ... you're on target.'

She could translate that into present terms. If she were wrong in her identification of Grace with Rosie, two elderly people would be totally perplexed by

what she'd written to them. If, on the other hand, she was right then she was on target.

Chapter 42

Hurricane.

While Kirstin was at the old people's home with Elsie, David was on his way to the control shed at the airstrip. Humphrey and Janet had a satellite phone and he had been able to speak to them on a couple of occasions as they drove north. He untied the string holding the door shut and went inside. After some problems with the power supply he managed to get the system working. He plugged in the phone, entered the telephone number and heard Janet's voice.

'Davo!'

'Where are you?'

'About five hours away.'

'There's a hurricane heading towards us? It's pissing down here. The roads will soon be cut.'

'It's pissing down here too, Dave. Don't worry. We'll get through. Just stick to arrangements ...'

As she spoke, David's attention strayed to the window. For some time, he'd heard a plane. It sounded as if it was flying north and he guessed it was heading overseas ahead of the storm. Now he wasn't so sure.

'Dave, are you still there?'

'Yeah ... hang on.'

He went to the window. A small aircraft was visible beneath the clouds and heading for the runway.

'Janet, there's a plane coming in.'

'Do you think it's a drug delivery?'

'Janet!' He cut her short. 'I don't have time to talk. I've got to shut this thing down and get out of here. I'll meet you like arranged.'

He put the phone back, turned off the power and looked around for signs that might betray his presence. His muddy footprints were a clear giveaway. He wiped them up as best he could, tied the door shut and sprinted for cover. Seconds later the plane touched down.

It was half-dry beneath the pandanus palms that bordered the airstrip. He reached them, slumped down on his belly and watched as the plane taxied towards him. It came to a halt on the cement apron beside the control shed and two men got out. One was slim and wearing a flying jacket. The other was muscular going to fat.

The big man began to unload packages from the plane while the slim man secured it to anchor points with steel cables. David guessed he was the pilot. He watched for a while then returned his attention to the big man.

He seemed to be exerting a huge amount of effort for such small loads. David was reminded of the time he and Tim were saving money by casting dive weights from lead bars. The bars were amazingly heavy for their size. The big man looked like he was carrying something even heavier. One thing was certain. The plane hadn't beaten its way through the storm to bring in lead. It had to be something far heavier and there could be only one explanation.

It had to be gold.

The thought was sobering. Charlie had estimated the weight of Tong Yee's gold at thirty kilograms. Tim had died for that. From the way the man was struggling, each of the packages weighed far more.

The packages were placed in a neat pile. There were twenty plus one the big man buried in a hole when the slim man wasn't looking. David guessed he intended to keep it for himself.

Then some boxes were unloaded, followed by an arsenal of guns. The slim man continued to fuss over the plane, checking everything from the engine to tire pressure. He was still fussing when Daryl arrived in the Volvo. The packages, boxes and guns were loaded into the lorry and they drove off.

* * * * *

The rain had stopped when he reached the Dutchman's cave. The old fellow was playing with his dogs. The two huge animals lowered their heads and growled when David approached. He knew the routine. It didn't matter who you were, you had to pay your dues. He threw them some ham sandwiches, which Noelene had prepared, and was allowed to proceed.

A bench stood beneath the overhanging rock that formed the entry to the underground dwelling. The old man called it his "stoop", a term David translated as porch. The next was "sundowner", which he translated as drink. Sunset was a while away but that didn't worry the Dutchman. He produced a bottle of rum and poured a glass for David.

'There's been movement on the block.'

'There has ...' David fell into the idiom. It was part of the slow, economical speech of the Australian bush. He'd encountered it in TV series. Now, he realized it was for real. There really were people who spoke it.

'I saw it come in.'

'Yeah,' David nodded.

'Daryl wasn't there to meet it.'

'No,' David shook his head.

'He usually is,' the old man continued. 'He gets all dressed up in his smart shorts and shirt and goes out there an hour or more before they arrive.'

David reached for his binoculars and looked down at the homestead. The Volvo was parked in front of the concrete blockhouse at the rear of the house. It was impossible to see details but the general impression was one of conflict. He recognized Noelene without the slightest difficulty. There was no mistaking her and the big man was easy to identify. He seemed to be having a heated argument with Daryl and the pilot.

It started to rain. David retreated back into the cave. Janet and Humphrey were due in a few hours and he wanted to rest before going out to meet them. The

original plan had been to return south immediately. That was no longer possible. A tropical cyclone was approaching. Hurricane-force winds would soon bear down on them. The rain would bucket out of the sky and the roads would turn to slush. He sank down in a rocking chair and nodded off to sleep.

Gunfire ripped into his dreams. There was no mistaking it for the sound of thunder. David ran to the cave entrance and looked down at the airfield. The runway lights were on and a plane was speeding down it, caught in the headlights of a pursuing vehicle. Tracer bullets raced after the plane. He expected it to vanish in a ball of flames but somehow it took off. The pursuing vehicle turned and headed back towards the control shed.

It wasn't what David had expected. He'd been geared up for the meeting with Humphrey and Janet. Now it seemed the police had got there first. Or was it the army? Whoever it was didn't matter. They had automatic weapons and weren't shy about using them. He guessed they had got wind of the arms shipment. At any rate, something had caused them to act. Things were happening much faster than he'd expected. That called for a change of plan.

His first thoughts were to go down and meet them. Then he wasn't so sure. The guys down there were a bit trigger-happy, perhaps with good reason. Tim had told him of an incident when he was in the army. A homicidal nutter was going around in the bush murdering people. An alert was put out and a helicopter pilot, mustering cattle, saw a red car hidden in some trees. It was identified as a rental car hired by a missing tourist. A unit described as the Special Weapons Squad swooped down and used a megaphone to tell the occupant of the car to come out. He replied with heavy calibre weapons and the boys didn't mess about. They blasted him away. They weren't going to risk their lives trying to capture someone who had killed a whole lot of people. What was more, they weren't police. They were the regular army and some of Tim's mates were amongst them.

David reached for his binoculars and was trying to work out what to do next when the sound of a motorcycle interrupted his thoughts. The old Dutchman heard it too and retreated to the rear of the cave. The dogs made for the bushes and David joined them. A bike was coming up the track. He saw its headlight bounce over the ground. Tim said the army used trail bikes. He guessed he was seeing the first of them arrive.

The dogs sniffed the air.

'Steady, boys!'

He reached out a hand to hold them back. The Dutchman was forever fearful for his safety and had trained the huge hounds to be aggressive. It was the last thing David wanted now. The guys on the bikes knew about aggressive dogs and didn't waste time ... they blasted them away and got on with the job.

To his horror the dogs leapt forward barking furiously as they did when anyone arrived. They neared the bike and something was thrown at them. David expected it to explode. Then a shrill voice cut the air.

'It's me!'

The bike shuddered to a halt and he saw Noelene. She hurled more meat to the dogs and turned off the engine. The old infantry rifle was slung over her shoulder and a can of petrol was strapped to her waist. Her face was flushed and she looked fifteen years younger.

David ran to meet her.

'I hoped you'd be here.' She threw her arms about him and brushed wet hair in his face. 'That bastard of a husband has taken off.'

David guessed she was speaking literally.

'I told them I had to warn you but they didn't want to know. They were too shit scared. The only thing they wanted was get out of here and save their miserable asses. They got it into their heads they'd be executed when the next plane arrived.'

For a moment, David was confused.

'Why did they think that?'

'There's a big panic on, David. That plane was loaded with gold and guns. There was so much, Kim thought he wouldn't be able to take off.'

David guessed Kim was the pilot.

'You're saying Daryl and the pilot were in the plane?'

'That's right!'

'So. Who was firing at them?'

'The big bastard! Who do you think? He went crazy when he found what they were doing. He's got guns and hand grenades like in the army.'

'How do you know?'

She wasn't listening.

'He's out to kill us, David. Get up behind me. We gotta get out of here. I've enough fuel to get us to Hells Gate. We can phone the police from there.'

'The police are on their way,' David said quietly.

Noelene looked at him with a mixture of incredulity and amazement.

'I knew there was something special about you.'

She leant out and kissed him. David wondered why older women found him attractive while younger women spurned his advances. He held her hand and she began to calm down but it didn't last.

'Get up behind me!'

She yanked at his arm.

'The bastard will kill us if he gets a chance.'

'He's got to find us first,' David said calmly. 'And that won't be easy unless we do something stupid.' He glanced at his watch. 'In a couple of hours the police will be here. We'll go out and meet them.'

* * * * *

Headlights pierced the blinding rain. David squatted on his haunches and watched them speed towards him. He was soaking wet and feeling cold. Noelene was a hundred yards up the road, strategically placed to check out any approaching vehicle and warn him if it was the Volvo.

The headlights topped the rise. Noelene flashed the all-clear signal and David flashed the signal arranged with Humphrey. The headlights flashed in reply and he relaxed a little. Everything was going to plan. The oncoming vehicle would now slow and stop beside him.

But it didn't.

It screeched to a halt and a figure in combat gear jumped out and hit the road running. David scrambled to a different position and crouched beneath a bush.

Lightning lit the scene and a continuous roll of thunder beat his ears. For a while nothing happened. Then, amongst the roaring of the wind, he heard his name.

‘Davo ...’

At first he thought his ears were deceiving him. Then he heard it again and there could be no mistake. No one else sounded like Janet Pulnitz.

‘Jan. I’m over here.’

She landed beside him. ‘Who flashed back there?’

‘Noelene ... I told you about her.’

‘You didn’t say she’d be with you.’ Janet slumped down. ‘We thought it was a bloody ambush. You could have told us what was going on. The first rule in any operation is to provide adequate intelligence ...’

David thought she’d be glad to see him. Instead, she rattled on about military tactics and the need to get things right. He checked her over. Janet was dressed in paramilitary gear and looked very impressive at first sight. But she didn’t stand up to close inspection. Her insignia looked phony and her only visible weapon was a small handgun. He cast a disappointed eye over it and thought about the impressive arsenal that had been unloaded from the plane.

Chapter 43

Sir George.

The weather was dry in Canberra and a light breeze was blowing from the south. Kirstin glanced at the grandfather clock in the hallway. It was almost 6pm. Samantha Fischer had delivered her letter to the Pagets the previous evening. There had been ample time for them to react but nothing had happened. Perhaps she’d guessed wrong and there was no connection between Aunt Grace and Rosie.

Then the telephone rang.

‘Kirstin ... it’s me.’

Cecilia Paget was as flustered as ever.

‘It’s daddy. I don’t know what to do. He’s just got back. He tried to see the head of the Prime Minister’s Department. I think they thought he was mad. No one knew who he was.’

‘Did he get my note?’

‘No. But he got one in Chinese from someone called Cherry Blossom.’

Kirstin reached for her coat. ‘Cecilia, I’m coming round.’

‘Yes. That’s why I phoned. Daddy is desperate to speak to you.’

‘I’ll be with you in ten minutes. I’ll have a friend with me. She’ll be in police uniform.’

The point failed to register with Cecilia.

‘That doesn’t matter. Bring your friend. Daddy so wants to speak to you.’

They arrived in a police car. Kirstin rang the bell and Cecilia showed her into the drawing room. Sir George bowed when she entered and spoke in Chinese.

‘I trained you well, little Cherry Blossom.’

'You did well, Master.'

Kirstin returned the bow and replied in the same language. It was the sort of playful exchange they had engaged in forty years earlier. George was standing behind a high-backed chair in which Grace was sitting. Both looked sick and nervous.

'We watched you advancing upon us,' George continued in English. Step by step you gathered information.'

'There was no need for it!' Grace's head jolted up. 'David, Tim and your poor little granddaughter. It should never have happened. I can't imagine what you think of me.'

'I never associated Rosie with violence or unkindness,' Kirstin replied quietly. 'I was impressed by the way she remained loyal to her girls. She made a home for them at the Island View. If she'd not done that we might never have discovered her identity.'

'My girls were loyal to me,' Grace's expression stiffened. 'They caught you snooping and they let me know.'

'Now. Now. Gracie.' George tapped her arm. 'Kirstie was only trying to help. She was worried about David.'

'David was taken care of,' Grace screwed up her lips. 'I saw to that.'

'Kirstie didn't know,' George insisted. 'If she had, she'd have acted differently.'

For a moment, Kirstin thought Grace would maintain her aggressive stance. Then, her head slumped and her whole body trembled. Cecilia dashed forward with a bottle of pills and pressed one against the old woman's tongue. The trembling subsided and Kirstin waited for Grace's condition to improve.

After a while she seemed well enough to speak.

'You know I came from a poor family?'

'I've read your grandfather's journal,' Kirstin replied. 'Tom Lee was not a poor man.'

'He despised me,' Grace hissed. 'He told me I'd come to no good but I built a bigger empire than his.' She looked up at Kirstin. 'I started my business career in the Island View because my family was poor and I needed seed capital. That's something a polite, middle-class girl like you would never understand.'

'I was never a polite, middle-class girl,' Kirstin retorted. 'I fled China as a refugee and came to this country as a single parent ... something which was not fashionable in those days.'

Grace's demeanour changed.

'I understand why you did it,' Kirstin continued. 'You needed capital and you got it by providing a much-needed service.'

'There you are, Gracie,' George squeezed her hand. 'I told you Kirstie was a sensible girl.'

The old woman's lips trembled searching for words. Eventually she found them. 'I know you were trying to help but you should have left us alone. My man found David. He's safe now. We have a property up on the Gulf. We used to run cattle on it but that was a long time ago. David's been taken there.' Her features hardened. 'My man found Footsie too ... he dealt with that piece of scum.'

Kirstin leant forward. 'Was Footsie working for Cecil Sparrow?'

Grace looked puzzled. Kirstin wondered if the old woman had understood the question. Then her head jerked up.

'Footsie was working for our son, Harald.'

She turned to George.

'You tell her. This is all too much for me.'

Kirstin waited while her former boss gathered his thoughts and adjusted the lapels of his jacket. He took a step forward and stood rigidly behind Grace. His bearing was that of a high-ranking public official, addressing a Cabinet meeting, thirty years earlier. He spoke in a clear steady voice.

'When Harald took over Paget Holdings it was a thriving business. However, before long, hotels which had been showing good profits were running at a loss. Harald replaced loyal staff with his cronies. He also associated with criminals. One of these, a corrupt cop called Mike Holland, used Paget Holdings to launder drug money.'

'And Sparrow?' Kirstin asked.

'Sparrow had been running the Narcotics Bureau for two years with nothing to show for it. Mike Holland came to the rescue. He supplied information about rival drug gangs and Sparrow made a killing. Holland had them both in his pocket. An incompetent hotelier and the incompetent head of the Narcotics Bureau. Both needed his support.'

'How did David get involved?'

'Our son Harald abused everything which came his way. He was given a senior position in Paget Holdings and he abused it. He married a beautiful woman and he abused her. Sue Lynne had a nervous breakdown and Harald was granted custody of their daughter.'

'And David?' Kirstin prompted.

'David became involved when he collected the suitcase from Grace's sister, Doris. There were photographs in it. I think you know about them.'

Kirstin nodded.

'Sue Lynne wanted those photographs. It was all part of a custody battle. She was going to use them to bring pressure on Harald. She'd taunted him with stories of how they would appear in the Sunday newspapers and on the Internet if Anne wasn't returned to her ...'

As he spoke a second police car entered the driveway. George reached for his walking stick. Kirstin took his arm and they made their way to the door.

'You'll come with me ... won't you, Kirstie?'

'Of course I will,' she squeezed his hand.

'There's no need for Gracie to be bothered at this stage. I don't want her under more stress than necessary.'

Kirstin helped him down the steps.

'I'll speak to them, Kirstie.' He grasped her arm as they negotiated the last step. 'I'll tell them all I know. It won't be much but there'll be enough to clear David's name and send a lot of people to jail.'

Chapter 44

Harald.

Noelene led the way to the birdhouse. She hoped to find something to eat but the only food was intended for birds. Most had gone. Daryl and Kim had taken them when they made their escape. She went from cage to cage releasing the few that remained.

'A right pair of stupid, useless bastards,' she muttered as she threw a pair of juvenile cockatoos outside. 'They have scruples about dealing in drugs but that doesn't stop them from dealing in birds.'

'Drugs!' Janet cut in.

'Yes. That's what this place is about. It's not about crocs and it's not about bloody birds.' Noelene hurled a handful of seed towards a baby parrot. 'They use this place because it's remote. You can sneak planes in and out without being seen. They bring in drugs, package them, then ship them down south.'

'How do you and Daryl fit in?'

'We don't. We're the pair of dills who look after the joint. We're meant to be too stupid to know what's going on.'

She let out an ironic laugh.

'Jesus. Not even my bloody husband's that bloody stupid.'

She threw more seed to the birds.

'Daryl and Kim knew they were handling millions of dollars in drugs. And, what did those stupid fuckwits do?'

Humphrey wished he had a recorder. He reached in his pocket and removed a notepad ... but it was soaking wet and useless.

Noelene pulled at her hair.

'It's all so bloody ridiculous. They were surrounded by money but they decided to make their fortune out of poor little cockies.'

'You mean the illegal trade in native birds?' Humphrey asked.

'Yes. If they'd had any sense, they'd have taken the gold. It was lying around but the silly bastards left it and took the birds.'

'They what?' Janet jumped to her feet. 'Say that again.'

'They unloaded a whole heap of gold from the plane,' David said.

'You mean the plane was loaded with gold?'

'Gold and guns.'

'Jesus.' Janet threw out her arms. 'You're telling me a plane full of gold and guns has just arrived?'

David nodded.

'So what's going on?'

'They're panicking,' Noelene said. 'Something's happened and they're getting ready to run.'

Humphrey tried to speak but Janet cut him short.

'What makes you think that?'

'We got a whole lot of messages from down south. First, they wanted us to do one thing then another. It was like dealing with a mob of old biddies, wetting their knickers.'

'You said there were guns?'

'Yes.'

'What sort of guns?'

Noelene gave a description of the weapons and Janet supplied names for them. They meant little to David. He had no interest in guns. From the excited look on Janet's face and grunts of alarm from Humphrey, he gathered that a deadly arsenal had been delivered.

'Where are they?' Janet asked.

'In the blockhouse back at the farm. It's got a steel door. You need the combination to open it.'

'Who's got that?'

'The big bastard who locked it.'

'Then we'll get it from him,' Janet fingered her gun. 'We'll ambush the bastard and force him to give it up.'

An expression of pure alarm developed on Humphrey's face. 'Our objective is to get David back to Canberra, not to extend ourselves at the operational level.'

'Humphles!'

Janet pointed to the puddles outside.

'We had enough trouble getting here. There's no way we're going to get back. The important thing is to get to those guns.'

'Prudence tells me we should adopt a passive role.'

'Who's bloody Prudence and what's she got to do with it?' Janet rounded on him. 'We've got to take the initiative ...'

David listened to the exchange. He was prepared to believe that Humphrey and Janet were somehow connected with the police. For a while he'd thought that Humphrey was Janet's boss but he'd banished that thought from his mind.

'They've been panicked, Humphles. They're preparing to pull out. We've got to do something before they get away.'

She was interrupted by the arrival of the Volvo truck. Its headlights appeared through the window as it sped towards them down the dirt track. Janet snuffed out the candles and produced a gun. David was surprised to see that Humphrey was also armed. They made for opposite corners of the building. Noelene removed the safety catch on her rifle and took up a firing position beside the door.

To David's relief, the Volvo sped past.

Janet dashed back inside.

'He's heading for the airstrip. There's a plane coming in. I saw its lights. It could be another delivery. We'd better get down there.'

* * * * *

The four of them lay on their stomachs beneath the matted fronds of a pandanus palm. The airstrip was directly ahead. The runway lights were on and the Doppler landing equipment in place. The big man stood beside the control shed ... gun in hand ... clearly visible in the light of an overhead lamp. Janet shelved her plans for an ambush. Humphrey was worried about the legal

complications of killing him. Her concern was that they would die in a hail of bullets if anything went wrong.

The plane landed and taxied to the cement apron beside the control shed. The pilot was the first to emerge. He was followed by two men in business suits. One reached into the plane, picked up a child and carried her through the pouring rain to the Volvo. The three men and the child drove off. The big man spent time securing the plane, tying it to anchor points on the apron. Then, after a careful check that it was properly tied down, he ran back to the control shed.

Janet returned her binoculars to their case.

'They've received reinforcements and have divided their forces ...'

She spoke in the precise, analytical voice she had learnt in the Army Reserve. At first, it had impressed David. Now, it irritated him. As far as he was concerned, Janet was half-brilliant and half-crazy. She was brilliant until her crazy side took over then it was dangerous to be anywhere near her.

'Davo!'

She always called him that when she was trying to get the better of him.

'Yes, Janet.'

'I propose we divide our forces.'

'What, specifically, do you propose, Janet?'

David had learnt the military language too. It hadn't been difficult. He had sympathy with it. It was the language of people who had to get things right at the operational level.

'I think we should mount two separate operations, Dave.'

'What do you mean by that, Janet?'

'I think we should mount a balanced offensive, David.'

'What do you have in mind, Janet?'

'I propose that Noelene and I remain here and that you and Dr Hansen proceed to the farmhouse ...'

Under different circumstances, David would have smiled. Davo had become Dave then David and Humphreys was now Dr Hansen. If it weren't serious, it would be comical. He glanced at Humphrey who was staring into space.

'Our own communications link has malfunctioned.'

Janet pointed to the soggy satellite phone that Humphrey had retrieved from his pocket.

'Noelene can brief you on the procedures necessary to gain access to the communications centre at the farmhouse. Having gained access, Dr Hansen can pursue our secondary objective, which is to establish a link with Canberra.'

Humphrey nodded his agreement.

'Noelene and I will pursue our primary objective, which is to cripple the aircraft of the opposing force and prevent their evacuation from this zone.'

Humphrey nodded once more. David guessed he welcomed the chance to get well clear of Janet and felt the same way.

* * * * *

They set off through the wind and pouring rain. David wore a urea bag over his head and shoulders. Humphrey struggled to keep dry beneath a black umbrella.

Both were ripped to shreds by the time they reached the homestead and sought shelter in a shed beside the crocodile pens.

Humphrey crouched in a corner and tried to dry his spectacles. David took his binoculars from their case. Despite the violence of the storm and Daryl's poor maintenance, the diesel generator was still functioning and the lights in the farmhouse were shining bright. David adjusted focus and saw people inside.

'They'll be the reinforcements Janet spoke about,' he said sarcastically. 'Two suits and a little girl.'

'Suits?' Humphrey said.

'Yeah,' David pointed towards the building. 'Those two ponces in business suits. They look like they belong in Canberra.'

'One of those suits is wearing a gun holster,' Humphrey replied blandly.

'How do you know?'

'His jacket blew open when he was getting down from the plane.'

David was impressed. Humphrey's spectacles were continually misting over yet he had picked out a detail like that.

'The other suit carries a gun in his waist belt and the pilot has a suspicious bulge beneath his flying jacket,' Humphrey continued. 'I see no evidence of the child being armed.'

David began to see Humphrey in a different light. He knew the fat man had a brilliant mind but had always thought of him as being totally incompetent when it came to operational matters.

Humphrey produced a gun. 'There's no point in hanging around. Go in there. Get the satellite phone from Daryl's office and meet me back here.' He handed the gun to David. 'Only use it in self-defence and don't fire unless you're sure to hit your target. All you have to do is remove the safety catch and pull the trigger.'

David placed the gun in his jacket pocket and returned the binoculars to his eyes. He wanted to get a further look at the farmhouse. The wind had blown down the shutters and he could see into the rooms. In one, a drama was being played out in shadows against the blinds. He was reminded of the Javanese puppet theatre in which the actors are seen in silhouette.

The little girl was there. She was clasping something and one of the men was trying to take it from her. He guessed it was a doll but why the man should be so insistent was a mystery. The only sure thing was that the child was greatly distressed.

In a neighbouring room, the man in the flying jacket was sitting at a table. The third man had changed out of his business suit and was now wearing a ridiculous looking uniform. As David watched, he walked out onto the veranda brandishing a gun. David returned the binoculars to their case and ran through the blinding rain towards the underneath of the house.

* * * * *

The stench was unbelievable. A mixture of rotten eggs and overripe faeces. Janet had never experienced anything like it but Noelene was unperturbed. She said the rotten egg part came from an ore deposit and the faeces came from crocodiles. The two women were hiding in the mangrove swamp. The tide was out and they were crawling up a creek bed towards the control shed. Janet had

stopped displaying her knowledge of guns and military tactics and had started to ask questions about the big reptile.

Noelene said they were in the animal's territory at a time when it was accustomed to go out for a bite to eat. Janet asked what they should do to avoid being eaten. Noelene said they should quit chattering, complete their mission as quickly as possible and get out of the creature's habitat.

Their aim was to sneak up to the aircraft, loosen the anchor cables and let the wind do the rest. Their problem was the big man. He was heavily armed and probably had night-vision scopes. Fortunately, the sky was almost continuously lit by lightning. Janet poked her head up, stole a quick look at the shed and ducked back down. She could hardly believe her bad luck. The man was standing at the window, gun at the ready, staring straight at her. She slid into the mud beside Noelene.

'Why does this always have to happen to me?'

'What do you mean?'

'I was humiliated by a couple of guys in Canberra and that was scary enough. You only get a certain number of chances. It's like throwing dice. If you keep at it your number comes up ... and that's the end of you.'

'We're going about this the wrong way,' Noelene said.

'What do you suggest?'

'It's too dangerous to go out there and loosen the cables. Gimme the rifle. I've serviced those planes. I know where they're vulnerable.'

'If you stick your head up he'll blast you away.'

'Only if he sees me.'

'You'll be dead if he does.'

'He won't.' Noelene grabbed the rifle.

The old infantry weapon had been dragged through the sea at Dunkirk by her grandfather. Somehow, he remained in possession of it and brought it back to Australia. She held the gun above her head and crawled forward. Janet followed, sliding over the putrid mud ... catching her breath.

Something moved ahead and the next flash of lightning revealed a small crocodile trying to turn round in the narrow channel. Noelene pushed past the frightened reptile and reached a spot where the creek was obstructed by a large mangrove tree. She checked the rifle and waited for the next flash. The plane was visible through a tangled mass of roots and branches but it wasn't an easy target.

Janet tugged at her sleeve. 'He's seen us.'

'What?'

'He's gone out the back and he's tracking round to the right.'

Noelene slid down and sat in the mud.

'What do we do?'

'Like you said ... get in a couple of quick shots and get out of here.'

Noelene waited for the next burst of lightning, got the plane in her sights and fired a carefully aimed shot at one of the fuel tanks. She was swinging towards the second when the sound of thunder was rent by the crackle of automatic fire.

'Out! Out!'

Janet had her by the sleeve.

'Back! Back!'

They scrambled along the creek.

Noelene did her best to keep the rifle out of the water and scarcely noticed the big crocodile on the mud bank ahead. Her mind was on the bullets skipping over the mudflat, stripping leaves from the trees.

* * * * *

David clambered over a pile of beehives. Many years earlier they had been stored away beneath the old farmhouse. Now, like the pillars that supported the building, the hives were alive with termites. They collapsed under his weight and he lay in the debris, trying to ignore the tiny creatures that were attacking him with mouths built for chewing wood.

The noise of his fall rang in his ears and he wondered if he had alerted the people overhead. Then the storm drowned out his fears. Within seconds it built up to a horrifying destructive power.

He crouched beside a pillar and shielded his head with his arms as sheets of galvanized iron were torn loose and something heavy crashed against the side of the building. Then, just as quickly as it had intensified, the storm died down.

“Storms within storms.”

That was how his grandfather described hurricanes.

“Swirling eddies of devastation in areas of relative calm.”

David decided he was in an area of relative calm and should make the best of it. There was a hole in the floorboards outside his bedroom. In the past it was an annoyance. Now it was an opportunity. He could squeeze through it and get into the corridor outside Daryl’s office without mounting the stairs and running the risk of being seen.

His first attempt had resulted in the collapse of the hives. This time he used an old washing machine. He pulled it across the concrete floor and climbed on top. The hole was too small to climb through but the boards on the sides were rotten. He pushed them aside and pulled himself up.

Daryl’s office was next to the room with the man and child. He crept forward and heard them above the howling wind. The child was screeching and the man was yelling at her, telling her to shut up.

There was something oddly familiar about their voices.

David stood beside the door and listened.

‘Why can’t I go to mummy?’

‘Shut up!’

He moved closer. Both the child and the man sounded uncannily like people he knew. He wondered if his ears were deceiving him. Then the child said something that banished all doubts from his mind.

‘I want to go to mummy and Charlie.’

‘Shut up!’

Suddenly, David knew why the old horse, the bright sunshine and the avenue of paperbark trees were so familiar. He’d been here before. This was the old family homestead, the place where he had spent holidays as a small child. He knew where he was and he knew who was on the other side of the door.

He threw it open and bounded inside.

His cousin Harald was sitting on a bed with his little daughter, Anne. He'd taken off his jacket and was in his shirtsleeves, red-faced and sweating. One hand rested on a gun that protruded obscenely from his waistband. The other clasped his daughter in a way that David found distasteful.

'Uncle David!'

Anne broke loose and ran to him.

Harald was slower to react. Like a man who had seen a ghost he stared at David dumbstruck. Then his lips narrowed and he drew in his breath.

'You're meant to be dead.'

'What do you mean, Harald?'

'Any normal person would have died out there. Harald shook. 'The sharks would have got them but they didn't get you.' He rose. 'Do you know why they didn't? I'll tell you, David. They recognized you as one of their own. They knew what a poisonous little sod you are ...'

David listened as he ranted on. Sue Lynne was the cause of it all. Harald shrieked her name. Sue Lynne was getting at him through his mother. David tried to make sense of the ravings.

'You're in with that bitch, David. She had you rescued. That's how you got here. Don't try to tell me different. I know what's going on between you two. I have my eyes and ears. There's nothing you can hide from me.'

He took a step forward and David placed Anne behind his back. Harald didn't scare him. It was what he might do to Anne that was frightening.

'You're a pervert, Harald. Everybody knows what you did to Sue Lynne. She had a nervous breakdown. It was so bad your own father had to rescue her.'

'My father!'

'Yes. Charlie took care of her.'

'You silly little bugger!' Harald's face contorted into a malicious smile. 'Haven't you worked it out yet? Charlie's not my father. He's my brother and your stupid mother is my sister. I'm your uncle. You'd be dead, darling boy, if someone hadn't fucked up.'

David eyed Harald's gun.

'Was it you who sent those men to kill me?'

'You left me no choice, David. I made you a generous offer and you refused to accept it.'

'You wanted me to betray Sue Lynne.'

'I wanted you to tell the truth. You screwed my wife but it didn't stop there. You went along with her filthy plans to defame my mother. No decent son can tolerate that. It pisses me off how I have to do everything myself.'

His hand slid towards his gun and David acted automatically. It was like a replay of the incident on the stairs at his grandfather's birthday party. David's foot smashed into Harald's groin and his fists rained down on Harald's chest. But, this time, there were no elderly people to express horror and consternation when Harald collapsed onto the floor screaming ... just the sound of his minder thundering down the veranda towards them.

David didn't attempt to pick up the gun. He'd made that mistake with Barry and lost the initiative. Instead, he kicked it through the hole in the floor and lowered Anne down after it. A moment later he was by her side rummaging for the weapon.

The gun looked better than Humphrey's but he couldn't find it. He gave up and carried the child to the protection of a low wall.

His thoughts had been to vanish into the pouring rain. That was no longer an option. The wind had intensified. Sheets of galvanized iron were flying past. It would be suicidal to go outside. He crouched beside the wall and sheltered the child with his body as something huge crashed against the side of the house. Sparks flew and the building was plunged into total darkness.

David guessed the power supply had finally fallen victim to the storm. The diesel generator, which had survived Daryl's faulty maintenance, had fused and died when the end of the building was blown apart. He cupped his ear and did his best to listen to the voices above his head. Harald was yelling instructions to the minder.

'He's gone down that hole ... shoot the bugger!'

A torch shone through the hole and swished back and forth amongst the broken beehives and dead washing machines. David watched it search in corners and other dark places. His aim was to avoid a fight. Now it looked as if he might have to use his gun.

The thought was chilling. Killing people wasn't fun. Being killed was even worse. He'd seen Harald's minder through the window. The guy was armed with an automatic weapon. He and Anne could be ripped to pieces with one blast.

He pushed the child down behind the wall.

'Stay here and don't move.'

He shouted in her ear and scrambled to one side.

A concrete pillar offered protection of a sort and was well away from the child. He dodged the torch and reached cover without difficulty. The minder was now directly above his head.

A quick shot was tempting. David rejected the idea. His preferred option was to sneak away with the child, not fight his way out. He watched as the torch moved systematically, skimming over the dirt floor and probing the wall where Anne was hidden. He wasn't fussed. She was well out of sight. Then, to his horror, the beam stopped and tracked back. His heart froze. A small foot was sticking out. The beam settled on it then retreated back through the hole. David watched the light flick over the floorboards above his head and a thought entered his head.

A professional would have taken him out by now.

The guy wasn't smart. His torch was shining through gaps in the boards. He was betraying his position with every move. Right now he was going through one of the bedrooms to the front veranda. There were steps at the end and his intentions were crystal clear. He was coming down to get them.

There wasn't a moment to lose. David scrambled to the front of the building. It was pitch black and he had to feel his way. That was to his advantage. The minder wasn't familiar with the layout and needed to use his torch. David knew the place like the back of his hand. The front corridor led to the shower cubicle and the steps from the veranda were opposite.

Noelene had put a cane chair and a small table beneath the steps. It was where she liked to sit with a dainty cup and sip delicious mouthfuls of tea as he cleansed his young body with her shampoos. David lacked Noelene's enthusiasm for the

ritual and had learnt to sneak down in total darkness and get in a quick shower before she knew what he was doing.

He got to the shower in record time, pushed the chair and table to one side and took their place beneath the steps. The minder was still making his way down the veranda. His footsteps were drowned by the noise of the storm but his torch was clearly visible. David watched its steady advance and was thrown into a state of confusion.

There was something unreal about the situation. The man was acting like a crud bouncer outside a downtown nightclub. David had seen them in Sydney, flaunting themselves on the pavements, puffed up like they were invincible. The slobs were too stupid to know there were people out there who could beat them to a pulp. Didn't the guy know his life was on the line?

The torch reached the boards above David's head and illuminated the cement slab at the bottom of the stairs. A foot appeared, silhouetted against the light of the torch. It landed on the first step and was followed by another. David levelled Humphrey's gun. It wasn't what he had anticipated. He was geared for a shootout. Killing a man in cold blood had never occurred to him. His hand trembled and he almost shouted out, telling the man to drop his weapon. Then something in his mind clicked.

Fire! Don't wait any longer.

He pulled the trigger and the explosion was still resonating in his ears when the legs crumbled, the torch fell and a body tumbled onto the concrete slab at the bottom of the stairs. David dashed outside stripped the man of his weapons and ran back into the building to find Anne.

* * * * *

Noelene peered across the mudflat. She had a turtle shell and was using it as a sort of shield. They'd found the shell earlier and Janet had cut a slit in it. She said people stand out like beacons when seen through infrared scopes at night because they are warm-blooded but cold-blooded animals, like turtles, are at ambient temperature so they merge with their surroundings. It all sounded crap to Noelene but she wasn't going to argue. The shell was protecting her from the elements.

Lightning lit the scene. She could see the big man, standing in ankle-deep water, making no attempt to hide. Janet said he was trying to draw fire and get them to reveal their position. They'd already taken a couple of shots at him and she wasn't prepared to risk another.

'Do crocs show up in infrared?' she asked.

'Why?'

'Because our mate, over there, is standing near a croc nest.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah. It's one Daryl has been trying to raid for eggs but the big bull always sees him off.'

Janet thought for a while before replying.

'Crocs are cold-blooded. So they take the same temperature as their surroundings ... just like turtles. That means they shouldn't stand out in infrared.' She started to giggle. 'With any luck he'll trip over big daddy and get eaten.'

Noelene sank back laughing.

‘That’s what should happen to all bloody males that give trouble ... they should get eaten by crocs.’

‘Or, they should fall into a bloody great toilet and get flushed away,’ Janet added. ‘When I was a kid I had this dream about my brother, Alan. Night after night I dreamt he’d fallen in and I’d sneaked up and pulled the chain on him.’

Their giggles were interrupted by a roll of thunder and brilliant flashes. Noelene grabbed the turtle shell and peered out over the mudflat. The wind blew in her face and a hail of debris struck against the shell. The big man was fighting to stay on his feet. The next flash saw him on his belly, slithering over the mud towards them. Noelene prayed that he’d end up in the gully and be dispatched by a karate blow from Janet. Then the wind slackened. The man struggled to his feet and made for the landing strip, slipping and sliding.

‘He’s bugged off.’ Noelene reached for the rifle. ‘I think he found the weather a bit too hard to take.’

She took aim at the plane as a tangled lump of vegetation slid into the creek. It lodged against a mangrove tree and formed an instant dam.

Noelene fired and Janet grabbed her arm.

‘Time to go!’

‘Where to?’

‘Back to the farm. We’ll drown if we stay here.’

Janet pointed to the rising water and heaved herself onto the mudflat. The problem now was to find something to hang onto. Her fingers fastened on a root. She pulled herself forward and found another. Noelene followed. They dragged themselves along in pitch black and blinding light, battered by lightning and a torrent of mud.

‘Don’t stop! Keep going!’

Janet shouted encouragement and was annoyed to see Noelene scramble past. She felt humiliated to be overtaken by an amateur ... especially one who was fifteen years older than herself. She followed Noelene off the mudflat onto a windswept slope, strewn with branches and fallen trees. They clambered over rocks and reached the protection of a rocky overhang.

It was like entering the foyer of a luxury hotel. Suddenly all was peaceful again. Nothing was flying through the air. No one was spraying bullets and there was no need to hang onto every available tree root to stay in one place. The two women collapsed gasping for breath. Noelene was the first to speak.

‘Jesus. That was exhausting.’

She emptied her pockets of mud and turned to Janet.

‘We’re lucky it’s not a big one.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean like Cyclone Tracy. When I was a kid, in Darwin, we were hit by Tracy. If this one was like Tracy, we wouldn’t stand a chance. We’d have been blown away by now. Our house blew apart around us. We only came out of it because we crammed into the laundry that my dad built. He’d made it out of reinforced concrete like it was a bomb shelter.’

‘What about the farmhouse?’

‘That’s gone,’ Noelene laughed. ‘It’s only the termites and cockroaches that’s holding the place together. Everything else rusted away years ago.’

'Dave and Humph have gone there,' Janet reminded her.

'Shit!' Noelene pulled a face. 'We'd better get there as soon as we can. This wind won't keep up forever.'

* * * * *

David carried Anne on his back and Humphrey trudged behind, shining his torch and doing his best to protect the child from the wind and rain. She clasped her arms round his neck and shouted in his ear.

'When will we be there, Uncle David?'

'Not long now.'

'Will mummy be there?'

'No. First we're going to see an old man who lives in a cave. We'll be safe with him. The wind won't blow his house down.'

'You mean like the little piggy? When the big bad wolf huffed and puffed he couldn't blow his house down.'

'That's right.'

David felt far from confident. He'd seen videos of hurricanes. They could strip a hillside of vegetation and they were in such a situation now. His concern was to get to the old Dutchman's cave while there was a lull in the storm.

'When will we see mummy?'

'When the rain stops.'

He pulled the child up higher on his back and continued to plod on.

* * * * *

Janet peered from beneath the rock shelter. The rain was still coming down in torrents but the wind had died down.

'Do you think we're in the eye of the storm?'

Noelene shook her head. 'If this was the eye there would be clear sky up there. We'd be able to see stars. When Tracy hit it was like that. We went out into the yard and everything was still. It was real spooky. Great flashes of lightning. And, all around, this big wall of cloud ... reaching up and up.'

'So. What do you think it is?'

'We're in a quiet bit.'

'How long will it last?'

'Not long.'

Janet decided it was time to act.

'Right!' She jumped up. 'We'd better get going. Dave and Humph are at the farmhouse. We'll join them there.'

Noelene didn't argue. Janet's behaviour continued to annoy her. She resented the displays of military genius but had to admit that the younger woman was good when it came to fighting. They slithered along and entered the grove of paperbark trees. Janet started to jog. Noelene followed. She knew Janet was fit but it was a fitness got on exercise machines in air-conditioned gyms ... she'd soon stop.

But Janet didn't stop. She kept going and Noelene was soon struggling to keep up. They left the grove and were nearing the birdhouse when the lights of a vehicle appeared. Noelene sprang into the bushes and watched as the Volvo sped past, slithering from side to side.

'It's the big bastard. He's abandoned his position.'

Janet grabbed the rifle.

'I'm going back to shoot up the plane. It'll never fly again once I've finished with it.'

Janet vanished and Noelene ran to the birdhouse, which had miraculously survived the storm. Five minutes passed and the Volvo reappeared, throwing up sheets of spray. At one point the driver lost control. Noelene thought he was going to turn over but he kept going. She sat shivering and was pleased when Janet reappeared.

'Two of the bastards.'

'What?'

'They got to the airstrip before me and I couldn't get a shot in. I saw them ... the pilot and the suit.'

'Who?'

'The pilot and the prissy bastard who was with the girl.'

'Anyone else?'

'No. They've left the kid and the other two somewhere.'

'So. What's going on?'

'Don't know.' Janet crouched down. 'The suit has been injured. The pilot is agitated. The big bastard, the minder and the kid are somewhere else. We'd better go to the farm and see what's happened to Dave and Humph.'

Chapter 45

Stalemate.

David peered through his binoculars. He was standing behind the old Dutchman at the entrance to the cave. There wasn't as much lightning as before but when the odd flash occurred he got a good view of the landing strip. The Volvo was parked on one side of the control shed and the plane on the other. Two men were standing beside it.

'The plane's still in one piece,' he muttered.

'Yes,' the Dutchman reached for the binoculars. 'They can take a lot of punishment if they're properly secured.' He looked down at the airstrip. 'Who are those two men down there?'

'One's my cousin and the other is the pilot. I can't see the big man.'

'That'll be because he's gone off to look for the little girl. They'll be meaning to fly out when he's found her.'

'Does he know about this place?'

'Don't see why he should.'

'If he does, this will be the first place he'll look. Perhaps we should go somewhere else ... find another cave or something.'

'There aren't no other caves,' the old man replied. 'You'll have to stay here. You can't take that little girl into the open. The storm will be back on us. We're in the

eye. It'll start up again and come on just as strong.' He pointed out to sea. 'Next time it'll blow in that direction.'

The wind intensified and they moved into the cave. The dogs followed and crouched beside the Dutchman. 'There are passages leading off at the back,' he said. 'If there's any nasty business, that's where I go.'

The passages were little more than clefts in the rock. David figured that Anne and the old man could get through but he and Humphrey would get stuck. He listened as Anne told Humphrey how big and strong Uncle David was and how he was going to save them from nasty men and big bad wolves. David hoped he was equal to the task.

He examined the gun he'd taken from Harald's minder. It had an ammunition clip and he'd removed it to see how many rounds remained. He wondered if he'd reloaded it correctly. Tim had told him about soldiers using unfamiliar weapons they'd taken from the enemy. In the heat of the battle, they'd done stupid things and killed themselves ... that was a worry.

His other worry was the storm. The old man said the eye was passing overhead. That didn't make sense. The wind had started up again but was still blowing from the same direction. It wasn't as strong as before and there wasn't as much thunder. Suddenly, one of the dogs pricked up its ears and sniffed the air. David guessed it had got wind of someone.

The old man leant forward.

'Go find him, boy.'

He pointed the big animal towards the cave entrance and it bounded outside, barking furiously as it always did when anyone approached. They heard it clatter down the path. David wondered if Janet and Noelene had arrived. That seemed unlikely. Noelene would have calmed the animal by now.

A shot rang out and the barking turned to terrified yelps. David grabbed his gun and went to the front of the cave. There was a spy hole between two boulders. He peered through it and saw a flashlight sweep back and forth. It settled on a twitching form slumped between two rocks. More shots followed and the twitching stopped.

Humphrey arrived by his side. 'Can you see him?'

'Yeah, he's got a spotlight trained on the dog.'

'Do you think you can get in a shot?'

'Only if he comes forward a bit.'

'If he does, aim at the chest. Keep firing until you're sure you've hit him. If he turns off the light and you have him in your sights, fire immediately.'

The man left the dog and came towards the cave.

It was spookily like the incident with the minder. The guy wasn't taking proper precautions. The spotlight was giving him away. It would be impossible to miss. Humphrey had explained the workings of his new gun. It fired in a scatter pattern. One of the bullets was bound to find its mark.

David braced himself and squeezed the trigger.

'Shit!'

'What's the matter?'

'Bloody thing's jammed.'

Humphrey snatched the gun away and David watched as chubby fingers pulled out the ammunition clip.

‘David. I know you’re in there.’

He heard the man’s voice.

‘We have to talk ...’

‘Don’t reply,’ Humphrey thrust the gun back in his hands. ‘He’s trying to draw you out. Get him to make the first move.’

‘David. We’ve no problems with you. All we want is the little girl. Her father will take care of her. Nothing bad will happen to her.’

The spotlight was turned off. David raised his gun and prepared to fire. Moments passed and he heard the voice again. ‘Mate. I don’t have all night. Either you bring out the girl or I come in and get her.’

The wind howled, drowning out the man’s voice. Then flashes of lightning lit the cave entrance and a figure appeared against the rock face. David hit the trigger. Chips of rock flew but the figure stayed put.

‘You bastard!’

The figure sprang back and David realized that he had been firing at shadows. Moments later something was tossed into the cave. It exploded before he could get to it: a dull thud followed by a pungent smell.

‘Tear gas!’

The old man snatched up Anne. ‘This way, girlie.’ He whisked her into one of the passages.

Humphrey reached for the gas canister with a broom and a hail of bullets hit the roof of the cave. David fired back, hoping to hit the man on ricochet. The firing stopped and he heard Humphrey’s voice.

‘I managed to throw it outside.’

Humphrey was choking on the gas and looked ready to collapse. David’s problem was his eyes. He’d not drawn breath since the canister exploded. He prided himself as a breath-hold diver and figured he could last another two minutes before blacking out but his eyes were causing him agonies. He slumped down and tried to remove his contact lenses.

Humphrey went to the rear. The wind had cleared the gas from the cave and blown it down the passage the old Dutchman had used to make his escape with Anne. He shouted down it and waited for a reply. None came and he returned to David with the bad news.

‘Do you think they were overcome by the gas?’

‘I don’t know.’ Humphrey shook his head. ‘There’s no way to tell. We can’t get through that small gap.’

‘We can’t go out through the front either,’ David observed. ‘We’ll be blasted away if he’s still there.’

‘Do you think he is?’

‘Don’t know,’ David shrugged. ‘One thing’s for sure: I’m not going out there to find out.’

‘It looks a bit like stalemate.’

‘We could try sending the dog out.’

‘You mean ... let it get blasted away?’

'No. The wind's blowing towards us. If he's still there, the dog will pick up his scent.' David placed his hands on the animal's head and pointed it towards the cave entrance.

'Go find him, boy!'

He imitated the old man's voice. The dog sniffed the air and ventured forward but no amount of encouragement would get it to leave the cave.

Chapter 46

Nick of time.

The first rays of a fragile dawn lit the sky and they heard noises. The clatter of footsteps and falling stones. The dog heard them too. It raised itself up and ventured forward.

David pointed to the entrance.

'Go find him, boy.'

This time there was no hesitation. The animal dashed outside barking furiously. David wondered if Noelene had arrived. The dogs were always pleased to see her. Then he heard the Dutchman's voice.

'Dave.'

There was a further clatter and the old man appeared.

'The bastard's got her.'

He stumbled forward, red-eyed, struggling for words.

'It was the gas. We had to leave. I pushed the little one up and we sheltered under the rocks. I thought we were safe up there. Then he came and found us. He took her away.'

The blood drained from David's face.

'How long ago was that?'

'I don't know.' The old man steadied himself against the rock face. 'I was feeling real crook. My lungs couldn't stand the gas. I was choking on it. I only just got the little girl out.'

'Was it light when he found you?'

'Yes. The poor child was so frightened when he came.'

David glanced at his watch.

'That wouldn't have been more than twenty minutes ago.'

'I did my best,' the old man sobbed. 'I was feeling so bad. I thought I was going to die.'

David looked out over the edge of the escarpment. The rain had stopped and the line between the mangroves and the sea was just visible in the growing light. 'If the plane's not damaged, they'll be able to take off,' he muttered under his breath. 'They'll be almost there by now.'

The old man took it as a rebuke. 'I did my best.'

'I know you did. Anne could have suffocated. We've just got to get down there and rescue her. What's the quickest way?'

'Down the goat track,' the old man replied feebly. 'The dog knows the way. He'll take you. We'll come along behind.' He turned to the big animal. 'Take him to the airstrip, boy.'

The dog took off and David did his best to follow, stumbling over rocks and crashing into bushes as he tried to keep up. His eyes were still giving trouble. Tear gas and lack of sleep had taken a heavy toll. Tears streamed down his face and he failed to see the dog when it stopped beside the track. It barked furiously and he retraced his steps. The animal was perched on a large boulder, peering out across the valley. He could not see what it was looking at but he could hear voices ... female voices.

'Cooeel'

They came and went with the wind. He recognized Noelene's shrill tones and returned the call. The dog gave him an approving glance and ran off down the hillside. David followed. The Dutchman had told the hound to take him to the airfield. He hoped it had got the message but was far from sure.

They had left the goat track and were heading downhill. It didn't make sense. The bottom of the valley would be awash. A creek ran there. Even in dry weather it had water in it. Now it would be a raging torrent.

He stopped and the dog stopped as if waiting for him to catch up. Was this serious guide dog stuff or just a game? The ground was already soggy. He should have stayed up on the ridge. The sensible thing was to forget the dog. It didn't know what it was doing.

Then he heard the cries again.

'Cooeel'

They were much closer now. David's confidence returned. The women were down by the creek and the pooch was taking him to them. They didn't have his eyesight problems and Janet was trained in the use of weapons. He'd give her his gun and she'd run ahead with it. The clip contained twenty rounds. One sharp burst from Janet and the plane would never fly again.

He reached the creek and found the dog barking furiously. He scarcely heard it above the din. Water cascaded over boulders and formed whirlpools where it forced its way underground. On the opposite side, two figures were dashing through the undergrowth in a mad race to reach him. Janet arrived first. The old infantry rifle hung about her shoulders and she looked as if she was ready to take on the world. She ran along a fallen tree that stuck out over the creek.

'What gives, Davo?'

'They've got Anne. They're trying to take her away.'

'What?'

'The little girl is Sue Lynne's daughter. The man is Harald.'

Janet looked down at the raging waters.

'Message understood. Get going, Davo. We can't cross here. We'll continue on our side and join forces at the bottom of the creek.'

The dog streaked ahead and David followed. He wasn't prepared to question the animal's judgment anymore. They were going in the general direction of the airfield and that was all that mattered.

The dog led with its nose and favoured tracks made by kangaroos and wallabies. David was forced to crawl beneath bushes and clamber over rocks in the full glare

of the sun. The strain on his eyes was agonizing and he was relieved when they reached a patch of rainforest above a waterfall.

It was shady there but his troubles weren't over. Vicious creepers hung down from the trees and snaked up from the ground. He had met them before and knew them as wait-a-while vines. They clawed at passers-by with razor-sharp hooks and had an evil reputation for not letting go.

The standard drill was to wait a while and untangle yourself. There wasn't time. He kept going and arrived at the bottom of the waterfall cut and bleeding. What had been a raging torrent of white water was now a full-blown river that flowed to sea along a broad channel it had carved in the mudflat.

David leant against a tree and tried to orientate himself. There was no sign of the two women and no point in waiting for them. If they couldn't cross higher up there was no way they could cross here.

His first priority was to sort out his contact lenses. He found a pool and washed his hands. The first lens came out easily. He sucked it clean, dowsed his eye and got it back in place. The second lens was more stubborn. It floated around and ended up beneath an eyelid. He was trying to coax it free when a sound caused him to freeze.

The whine of an engine was coming from the airfield. It was the last thing he wanted to hear. Everything depended on getting there first. He had a gun that could disable the plane. But there mustn't be anymore shootouts. People got hurt when that happened and one of them could be Anne.

David forgot about the lens and started running. At the edge of the trees his worst fears were confirmed. The plane was in its parking bay beside the control shed and the engines were running. People were milling around and Anne was amongst them. As he watched, Harald picked up the child and handed her to someone on board.

His heart sank. The plane would fly off. Harald would take Anne somewhere and Sue Lynne would never see her little daughter again. Harald had got the better of him again. It was always like that. It didn't matter how hard he tried. Harald always came out on top.

The gun slipped through his fingers and he sank to the ground choking back tears. His world was sharp with one eye and a blur with the other. It didn't matter. He could be half-blind or fully blind. There was nothing he could do to save Anne. Everyone would know how hard he'd tried. No one would blame him for what happened.

The thought was comforting and he nursed it for a while but it didn't last. Deep down he knew that you never gave up. It didn't matter how battered or tired you were you always kept going. He pulled himself up and plodded on.

The dog followed at his heels, whining. The animal seemed to sense his anguish and wailed miserably whenever he let out a sigh. Its mournful cries added to his despair and he arrived at the airfield with a sense of impending doom.

The plane was taxiing when he got there. The wind had stopped gusting and was blowing steadily down the runway. As he watched, it turned and prepared for take-off. Everything looked under control. The pilot wasn't hurrying. David imagined him checking his instruments. Moments passed. The wind eased and the plane moved forward.

After that everything was depressingly predictable. Take-off was never in doubt. The wind was in their favour and the plane was soon in the air. It rose over the mangroves and headed out to sea. David guessed the first stop would be Papua New Guinea. The coast was much the same. Mangrove swamps and a sparse population. There would be bush airfields where they could land unnoticed.

What would happen after that? David thought about possible routes and his mind began to clear. Harald didn't have much choice. His plane had a limited range. Sooner or later he would have to put down in one of the more densely populated parts of Asia. When that happened things could get difficult.

Harald couldn't disappear into nowhere. The modern world wasn't like that. There were surveillance satellites that could detect a fly on a cow's bum. Criminals only got away with things like drug trafficking if the police weren't on the lookout for them. If they were it wasn't so easy. David began to think positive thoughts. Humphrey could use the satellite phone in the control shed to call Canberra. The authorities would put out an international alert or whatever they did under the circumstances. Humphrey would know.

The shed was in chaos when he got there. Mud covered the floor and papers smouldered in a corner. He stomped them out and looked for the phone. It wasn't on the control desk or anywhere else. Harald must have taken it with him. That meant he'd have to abandon Plan A.

Plan B was to activate the communications channels. He hit the power switch and waited while the screen flickered into life. The usual icons came up. Then, when everything seemed to be going well, the system froze and a message appeared telling him to enter the access code.

Where the hell was it?

He hunted amongst bits of paper stuck to the wall. Harald's morons had probably put it there. Or was it on the floor? They'd been burning things. He had to find it. With the roads cut it would be days before they could get to Hell's Gate and use the phone there. By that time, Harald would be on the other side of the world and the trail would have run cold.

He went down on his hands and knees and was searching amongst the charred fragments when a sound distracted his attention. It was coming in bursts and sounded like the plane was returning. But he couldn't be sure. If it was the plane, there was something seriously wrong with the engines.

He went to the door and saw the plane coming in low over the water. The wings dropped when the engines spluttered and rose when they burst back into life. David was reminded of times when the inflatable was low on fuel. When that happened he nursed his craft home. He kept her on a level keel and didn't do anything to upset the delicate balance.

The guy flying the plane hadn't learnt that simple lesson. He was throwing his rig around like he could make it do anything he wanted. His final stupid act was to go into a tight turn. David watched in disbelief. Didn't the idiot know that the little fuel remaining in his tanks would be swept to one side? If it ended up in the fuel lines that was a plus. If it went the other way it was a minus.

It was a catastrophic minus. The engines died halfway through the turn. The plane lost power and the pilot was forced to dump. He splashed down on the

mudflat throwing up sheets of spray. The undercarriage collapsed and the aircraft continued on a forward glide, skidding towards the control shed.

It came so close David could see the people inside. They stared back at him with startled faces. One had a flying jacket. Another wore a business suit and held a doll in a chequered dress. Caught in a brilliant shaft of light the plane and the people looked totally unreal. Then David realized that the man was Harald and the doll was Anne. He jumped from the shed and ran after them.

Only a few small mangroves stood between the plane and the creek. It ploughed through their puny branches and plunged into the raging waters. David ran to the bank and saw the stricken craft carried along, nose up, tail down. It reached mid-stream, smashed into a submerged tree and remained there, bobbing up and down. Terrified faces stared from the windows.

He glimpsed a chequered dress and threw himself into the water. The current carried him along. His main problem was to make contact. There would be no second try if he missed. He would be swept out to sea and it would take an eternity to get back. He fastened his eyes on the plane and struggled to remain on course.

Contact came with bruising efficiency. His feet rammed into the tail and he was carried along the fuselage to a wing. People were struggling inside. He saw them through the misted windows and yanked at the emergency exit as fists hammered on the other side.

His thoughts were on rescue. Others had different ideas. The exit popped open and the big man came out fighting. He jabbed David on the shin and pushed him from the wing. He struggled to hang on as blows rained down on him.

Then Janet appeared.

She rose up from the water like an avenging angel and mounted an attack. The big man was pulled from the plane and cast to the current. David scrambled onto the wing and grabbed Anne. Someone tried to hold her back and was kicked in the face. He wrapped his arms round the child and fell into the water with her.

His world was a blur when he got to shore. He guessed he had lost both contact lenses and spent some time probing his eyes for them. One was beneath an eyelid and he pushed it into place. The other was lost. He didn't care. He'd achieved his objective. Janet and Noelene were wading ashore with Harald and the pilot. Humphrey and the old Dutchman were plodding towards the control shed with Anne. He ran after them and picked up the child.

'Uncle David.' She put an arm around his neck. 'Uncle Humph knows some men who have a plane. He's going to talk to them and they're going to come and fetch us. Then I'm going to get on another plane and fly to America to see mummy.'

They entered the control shed and Humphrey looked at the message on the screen. 'It'll take a while,' he muttered. 'The system has been immobilized. We'll need to hack our way past the codes.'

He was typing at the keyboard when Janet burst in.

'What's going on?'

David explained the problem.

'Don't waste your time.' She turned to Humphrey. 'I know the shit who shut it down. He's in a tree back there. I broke his collarbones. Gimme a slate or something I can write on. I'll swim out and get them off him.'

Humphrey handed her a ballpoint pen. 'You don't need a slate. You can write on the back of your hand like we do when we go diving.'

Janet snatched up the pen and dashed back outside. David followed. Noelene was there with an iron bar. Harald and the pilot lay at her feet, trussed like chickens and menaced by the dog.

'David.' Harald let out a wheezing noise. 'I can't breathe.'

'Stop wasting our time.' David glared at him. 'There's more bad weather coming.'

The pilot raised his head. 'The cyclone's passed.'

Noelene sprang at him. 'Shut up! You stupid dickhead! You didn't even check your fuel gauge before you took off. I blasted holes in your tanks and most of it drained away. No one's going to listen to you.'

She turned on Harald.

'And no one's going to listen to you. You're the mongrel who said David had broken your back. You bloody liar.'

David watched as Janet swam out to the big man. He was draped over the branch of a submerged tree like a piece of discarded clothing. She rocked him up and down and he screamed. Then they started to talk. It looked as if he would be cast out to sea then he slumped in submission.

Janet took something from his pocket.

'I've got it, Humph.'

She arrived back soaking.

'It's in here,' Janet opened a leather wallet. 'The stupid bastard couldn't remember the code so he wrote it down.'

The contents of the wallet were emptied on the control desk. Plastic cards, bank notes, soggy bits of paper and a betting slip. Janet picked it up and read a number. Humphrey entered it and the system flashed into life. Within seconds he was talking to someone.

David heard a man's voice.

'We have a flight in the air. How's the weather with you?'

'Ground conditions are adequate,' Humphrey said. 'David and Anne Paget are safe and standing beside me. We have taken three male persons into custody. A fourth member of their group is dead. I am unaware of any other hostile forces in our vicinity.'

'Message received and understood. Prepare to be evacuated within next forty minutes.'

Humphrey turned to the old Dutchman. 'Are you ready to come with us?'

The old fellow looked towards his dog. 'Can he come too?'

'Of course.'

Humphrey turned to Janet. 'Are you ready, Ms Pulnitz?'

'Ready, Sir.'

'Haven't you forgotten something, Ms Pulnitz?'

'What might I have forgotten, Sir?'

'One of our captives needs to be got out of a tree.'

Janet pulled a face and fidgeted.

'They won't go without him, Ms Pulnitz.'

'No, Sir.'

She bent down, picked up a coiled rope, tied one end about her waist and went outside. Noelene took the other end and they trudged down to the creek.

‘Bloody Humphrey.’

Janet turned to Noelene as they waded into the water.

‘Can’t he forget sometimes?’

Chapter 47

Caged bird.

Chief Investigator Sparrow pressed the button to call the executive lift. He was irritated by the slow response. No doubt the cleaners were using the lift. That was expressly forbidden and he was determined to take strong action to put an end to the practice. The lift eventually arrived and he reached the top floor in a bad mood. He fumbled in his pocket for his pass and was surprised to see a strange face on the other side of the security desk. The young woman glanced at the pass.

‘Thank you, Chief Investigator.’

She pressed the button, which released the catch to let him through.

‘Thank you, officer.’

The Chief Investigator walked down the corridor. The top floor was oddly quiet. He expected his senior staff to be present when he arrived. Even Mrs Cohen, his secretary, was absent from her desk. His own office lay at the rear and visitors had to present themselves to Mrs Cohen before being allowed to proceed further. He was surprised to see the door open and a male figure standing with his back to him. He was even more surprised when the figure turned round.

‘Dr Hansen!’

‘Good morning, Chief Investigator.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I’m on duty, Chief Investigator.’

Cecil Sparrow’s face reddened.

‘You are not, Dr Hansen. You are on suspension.’

‘No, Chief Investigator. I’m on secondment.’

Cecil glanced at his safe. The door was open and files had been removed. They were stacked neatly on the floor, surrounded by faded photographs of two young women engaged in sexual acts with overweight, middle-aged males.

Humphrey produced a police badge.

‘I have been seconded to a special task force of the Federal Police Service, Mr Sparrow. The task force was established by the Attorney General to investigate allegations by Sir George Paget and Mrs Grace Paget that serious irregularities have occurred in the exercise of your responsibilities ...’

Cecil Sparrow scarcely heard the words. In the corridor, outside, he could see Rodney O’Neill handcuffed to a uniformed police officer whom he recognized as Janet Pulnitz, a former member of his staff.

‘I wish to speak with my legal adviser.’

'You are free to do that, Mr Sparrow.'

'Mrs Cohen knows the number. She will telephone him.'

'Mrs Cohen is in the interview room, assisting us with our inquiries. You will need to call him yourself.'

Humphrey watched as his former boss tried to dial the number. 'You have to dial zero to get an outside line,' he explained. 'Write the number down and I'll dial it for you.'

Epilogue

The little girl clutched her toy koala with one hand and held onto the cabin attendant with the other. An immigration official walked beside them. They passed a security barrier and entered a room marked Special Services. It was 4.45 pm at JFK International Airport.

Five minutes later the little girl emerged, clasped by a smartly dressed woman. She skipped joyfully beside her as they made their way to a side exit. There, the immigration official left them.

In a nearby car park, a tall athletic man of uncertain age stood waiting. Bald-headed and sun-tanned, he waved enthusiastically.

The little girl's eyes lit up.

'Charlie! Charlie!'

She dropped the koala and ran towards him.

