

Volume I

Thesis by creative artefact

In the Garden Where We've Been Planted

This work precedes

An Exegesis to Accompany the Novella, Part II

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In the Garden Where We've Been Planted

a novella by Henry W Prunckun

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, businesses, organisations, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people—living or dead—community groups, organisations, events, or locations are entirely coincidental and unintentional.

To Ann and all the other Australian women who have captured the
hearts of American men.

Abstract

The title of my research project is *In the Garden Where We've Been Planted*, which is a metaphor for a philosophical outlook on life that reflects the desire for love. My statement of guiding purpose was to write a love story that is couched in the private investigation crime genre, but one with literary tones. I did this using adaptation theory to structure the story based on Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness* and then used intertextuality to leverage the reader's familiarity with Conrad's book to my story.

The output of my research project is an exegesis that is in dialogue with the artefact—a novella. My project contributes to knowledge through my interpretation of this approach as well as my application of theory to practice.

The rationale for undertaking to the project is the culmination of a few factors—my personal interest in the private investigation (PI) genre as well as my interest in Conrad's writing. But essentially, I wanted to explore a different approach to how PI stories, one where love, rather than murder, is the focus. My interest in using Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* as the basis for my novella allowed me to use a quest plot for a different purpose—to find a missing person. In a sense the missing person crime is a trope for exploring other issues associated with the human spirit. In this case, rediscovering love.

As we know, in Conrad's story the central character—Philip Marlow—journeys into heart of Africa searching for the ivory trader—Kurtz—who has gone mad. The PI of my story does similarly—he's looking for, not an ivory trader, but an American Indian artist, who too has gone somewhat mad. So, my story starts in Massachusetts and moves to the Australian outback (so, in this regard, it could be seen as being written for a North American audience).

My PI protagonist is not the usual bitter alcoholic, divorcee, damaged war veteran, or a burnt-out ex-cop. This is not to say the narrator does not have his faults—he does, but he has engaging qualities—he is a romantic, moral according to his philosophy, and quite kind in his relationships. If he sounds normal, he is. So, what makes my proposed novella intriguing? It's my view that it's the complexity of the situation into which the character is thrust—a phone call from a socially high-profile Boston art curator about her missing husband.

Intertextuality allowed me to make connections between the original text, and other texts, and the adapted text; in doing so, I was able to establish parallels with key characters and the overall plot line, therefore helping outline a relationship between the two.

Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, my story explores issues relating to the human condition. In *The Garden Where We've Been Planted* looks at problems such as racism and big-picture political issues involving the impacts of colonisation on Indigenous people centuries on. However, where Conrad's book looked at the politics involving what was then the Belgian Congo, my novella looks at land disposition by American Indians and to some extent Aboriginal land rights. Though neither are covered in depth, the attention given is sufficient to provide the literary tones I sought.

I used practice-led research as my methodology for the project. This involved the critical reflection process employed elsewhere in creative arts research comprising the plan, act, observe, and reflect cycle. My method included library research, site visits, lived experience and active documentation.

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VOLUME II—EXEGESIS

An Exegesis to Accompany the Novella

In the Garden Where We've Been Planted Bound Separately

Acknowledgment

Extracts from the 1969 song *Where Do You Go to (My Lovely)* that are cited in the novella and the exegesis were used with the kind permission of Peter Sarstedt.

List of Named Characters

In order of mention:

I	Unnamed narrator; the private investigator (The PI)
Miles Stoner	Lead Investigator, Whitney Investigation Agency
Sophie	PI-narrator's youngest of his twin daughters
Ellen	PI-narrator's recently deceased wife
Rosemary "Rosie" Kozynski	Sophie's friend through work and a woman of interest to the PI
Michael Drew	Local real-estate salesman who has a romantic interest in Rosemary Kozynski
Yvette Kerslake	Client and wife of the missing Narragansett Indian artist, Kurt Kerslake
Kurt Kerslake	Boston artist, turned political activist, subject of the missing person's search
Isabel González	Yvette Kerslake's Venezuelan born housekeeper
Corey Granfield	One of the PI's close friends
Lucian Trudeau	One of the PI's close friends
Giacomo "Jack" Pozzani	Owner of a family-own Italian restaurant in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts
Micaela Romani	Giacomo Pozzani's daughter and co-chef at Pozzani's restaurant
Enrico Romani	Micaela Romani's husband and co-chef at Pozzani's restaurant
Maria Pozzani	Giacomo Pozzani's wife and <i>maitre d</i>
Gjertrud Trudeau	Lucian's Norwegian born third wife
Beth Granfield	Corey's wife
Faye Bellcroft	Australian folk singer and the PI/narrator's new love
Mrs Walkley	Owner of the bed & breakfast at Orroroo, South Australia
Lloyd Miller	Detective Sergeant, South Australia Police
Georgina Halliday	Owner of the Prairie Hotel at Parachilna
Blanche	Wife of the Parachilna handyman
Francis	Head waiter at the Prairie Hotel, Parachilna
Leon	A harlequin character who is one of Kurt's disciples

Carrie	Barmaid at the Copley pub
Barney	One of Copley's town dogs
Donna	Owner of Donna's Café, Copley
Viktor Gjeka	Town bully
Harold Briggs	Radio engineer for the El Dorado Mining company
"Auntie" Doris Wooragee	Aboriginal community Elder who lives in the township of Copley, South Australia
Doctor Huong Tran	Originally from Vietnam, the young physician at the hospital at Leigh Creek, South Australia
Professor Northrop Adams	Kurt Kerslake's treating physician and professor of cardiac research at Massachusetts General Hospital

One



There were cracks in the sidewalk that caught the fallen leaves. The cracks looked like little fingers reaching out to snatch the brittle structures as the wind blew them to some imaginary destination. The sun made this otherwise unremarkable scene something of a marvel, especially because of the way the light was diffused through the red leaves still hanging from the tree.

In that moment, I thought that people were like trees. Some were planted in gardens that allowed them to grow and thrive, while others could only strike their roots wherever the wind blew their seeds. The winds of fortune blew hot and cold, so it was the luck of the draw whether the seeds would prosper. I looked up again. The sun was playing a hide-and-seek game behind the sparsely covered branches.

I thought, *Even the Garden of Eden wasn't a paradise.* If I had believed in God, I would've been angry to think that a Divine Power purposefully set out to incorporate hardship into Life's design. But knowing that life was about random variation—happenstance, fluke, luck, quirk—not deities, I could accept these anomalies. We are all dealt a hand of cards at birth and it is up to us to play that hand at the Table-of-Life the best we can. It's the limits of the cards we hold—and good luck or misfortune—that determines our prospects. We simply need to learn how to flourish in the garden where we've been planted.

Then, as if it were off in the distance, I made out Miles Stoner's gruff voice. But his words were just garbled sounds. The joy of watching the prismatic colours of the leaves as they danced with the sun was far more rewarding than listening to the monologue of a dour, self-righteous man, but he managed to divert my attention.

Stoner was middle-aged with a stomach that hung over his belt causing his shirt to be untucked. He held a camera almost parallel with the sidewalk. In his unmannered way, he said, "See, if you take the picture from this angle it shows the height of the crack. If you take it looking down, you lose the depth of field, it looks flat." He paused and stared at me as if I

was a mental incompetent. “And we don’t want it looking flat in court. We want it to look like Mount Greylock. We want the judge to see why the plaintiff tripped.”

His arm jutted out, pressing the camera against my chest. “Here, shoot a few frames and let me see ‘em.” He pushed the camera at me harder—it was an expensive Nikon digital single-lens reflex.

I held it, but dared not to look up because my impulse was to drive the camera into his face and tell him to look at it from that angle.

“Okay,” I said, staring at the camera, “leave it with me, I’ll practise.” I managed a smirk, but not a smile.

“Good attitude. I like you.” He didn’t and I knew it, but I didn’t care. “You’ll develop well,” Stoner said, then walked back into the building.

I stood thinking, *Who the hell does he think he is?* I didn’t need lessons in how to photograph the gap between two slabs of concrete. More importantly, I thought I had lost direction, and like the winds of fortune I was being blown into the cracks along with the dead leaves. I was coming to the view that joining this agency was a bad decision. I should have never sold my PI business after my wife’s passing. But before I could decide whether to should smash his SLR on the sidewalk and apologise for my ‘clumsiness,’ or do as I was told, my cell phone chimed. I fished it from my backpack.

It was a Boston number, but one I didn’t recognise. I retrieved the voice message and heard a woman’s voice. In a flat tone, she said, “This is Yvette Kerslake. I need to speak to you. My number is. . .” and then rattled of a series of numbers.

Her name didn’t mean anything to me at first, but then I recalled reading about some controversial art exhibit she curated at a museum several months back. Something to do with American Indian art. This was a relief because I sometimes got calls from people who were convinced they were being followed by secret government agents or were having their thoughts stolen by the Illuminati’s supercomputers. This woman, however, sounded normal.

I put the phone in my backpack and returned to the office.

I placed the camera on Stoner’s desk—he was at the coffee machine cooking up another latte. Waving to him, I said, “Got to go.”

“Okay,” he replied. “Do you think you’ll master the art of macrophotography?”

I gave him the thumbs-up, controlling an urge to show him my middle finger and to tell him to sit on it. I walked back out the door and onto the street.

Two



My jeep was parked around the corner on Maple Street. East Longmeadow was one of a few small towns in Western Massachusetts that didn't have a Main Street. Maple Street was its *de facto*.

As I walked, I phoned Sophie to see if she had finished work for the week and wanted a ride home instead of walking. She said she'd like that so I made my way over to the medical clinic on North Main Street where she worked in the lab while she studied for her doctorate in medicine. I felt I needed to talk about my future, and Sophie was a good sounding board. She was the bravest of my three kids during the six months while Ellen slipped away. Despite radiation and chemo, there had been no hope and Sophie saw it in herself to take over as the family's matriarch.

The camera incident with Stoner had been the latest in a series of put-downs from the newly appointed lead investigator. Taking a contract job with this agency was a way of avoiding the pain I felt with Ellen's passing. But it didn't work out that way. The relief never came and it only postponed facing up to the fact that I had lost my life's companion. Looking at that tree today made me realise I needed to adapt to this new garden.

I pulled into the clinic's parking lot and saw Sophie waiting in front of the neighbouring building, Romito's Italian delicatessen. She was talking with her friend Rose Kozynski, who worked at the deli.

"Thank God it's Friday," Sophie said as she got into the passenger's seat, slamming the door.

I didn't reply. As an atheist, I never could work out who to thank for Fridays. I waved to Rose and she walked over.

My arm was resting on the door frame of the open window and she placed her hands on it. She leant forward to talk. It was the first time we touched. We had met for coffee a half dozen times over the past year when our paths happened to cross at the supermarket. She was

funny, bright and had a positive attitude. She wasn't stunning to look at, but she was good company—she had a warm smile and a gentle laugh.

Rose was my age and I got the sense that she was interested in getting to know me better. She had lost her husband a few years before Ellen's death. He was a factory foreman and was killed in an industrial accident. She was demure, not one for bars, clubs or Internet dating. I don't think she saw many men in the years since her husband died, but I got the feeling she'd be interested in seeing me. I wasn't sure I was ready, but when she touched me, I realised the time had come. I was tired of living alone and wanted to spend my future with someone. I wanted a warm and trusting relationship, a relationship that flourished in good times as well as whenever the world served-up the pain it held in reserve—like today. But what I missed the most since Ellen's passing was being held, the warmth of being held in a woman's arms. The way a woman's body feels in the face of the day's worries was comforting. And I would have enjoyed that now.

As she and Sophie said their goodbyes, I couldn't help daydreaming about her hands touching me. I tried to absorb the tingle it infused in me. I wanted to store the feeling in an emotional reservoir so I could call on it later. But I didn't want to drive away.

Rose smiled, squeezed my arm and said, "Hey, I'll see you soon?"

I couldn't let her go. Without thinking I blurted out, "Listen, the cinema is showing reruns of a few of the classics. They're screening *The Maltese Falcon* on Monday night. What say we go?" As the words passed my lips I felt myself cringe at the awkwardness of my suggestion. I felt stupid. I hadn't asked a woman on a date since before I married. I wasn't sure if that was how it was done, but I didn't know when I'd run into her again.

She hesitated, looked down and said, "Oh, I have something on Monday." She lifted her gaze, "But let's do it another time."

"Sure, no problem." I drove off feeling foolish and rejected. Being older, asking for a date should be easy, but there was the same self-doubt and hurt feelings I had when I was young. *Another time?* Was that a polite way of saying 'don't ask again' or was it genuine? Had I misread the signs about her interest in me or was I being too sensitive?

As my Jeep gained speed along the deserted road, I turned to Sophie and asked, "What was that about?"

“Well, if you were going to ask Rosie out, you waited too long. Can’t believe you waited this long! The two of you would have so much fun together. She’s just started seeing that guy from Dillon Realtors—Michael Drew. They’re going to that movie on Monday. She told me a few days ago.” Sophie folded her arms and stared forward.

I couldn’t accept Michael Drew was seeing her. He was one of those slick salesman types with the ability to embellish anything, including his public image. Time waits for no one and I waited a year. I felt a twinge of envy, or was it jealousy?

Sophie said, “She’s planning one of those fourteen day European tours.” She looked at me, adding, “Soon,” as if to imply, ‘Move fast or you’ll be left behind.’

Hmm? A European tour? That would be one long coffee conversation. I thought, Drew couldn’t be in the mix for that. Surely not.

Sophie was looking out the window. “So, how was it?”

“Do you mean work?” I inquired. “If that’s what you mean, I’ve had better days.” I turned the wheel hard to the left and up the hill, heading out of town.

Sophie must have sensed my frustration. She was good like that. “Why do you let him get to you? He probably thinks you’re after his job.”

“I’m not after his job. If I wanted to be the boss again I would have applied for it when it was advertised. Anyway, you flatter him by crediting the halfwit with enough brains to actually think that.” There was a moment’s silence. All that was audible was the whirr of the motor and vibration of the deep-tread tyres.

I said, “I want to ask you something.”

“You want to get serious about Rose?”

I smiled. “I have been thinking about it.”

“She’s nice, isn’t she? You know, being sentimental is charming, but dwelling on the past won’t bring Mom back; it’ll only ensure you’ll miss out on a new love.”

Her acceptance provided respite to my taxed emotions. Hearing those words meant I could relax, get on with enjoying life after years of long hours at work and having been robbed of my wife’s companionship. I could start to see a place in my mind’s eye for Rose Kozynski in my future. But I had to think of something to head off Michael Drew. I needed a strategy.

“Do you think there’s hope for someone new in my life?”

“Yes, but you have to take a chance.” She looked at me as if to underscore the point. As if scolding a disobedient child, she waited for my response.

I swallowed hard, “Okay, I’ll take a chance.”

“You have to let go. Inertia is disastrous when it comes to love. Bertrand Russell said, ‘Of all forms of caution, caution in love is perhaps the most fatal to true happiness’.” She looked at my smartphone on its dash holder. “Why’s your phone flashing?”

“Oh, it’s a message.”

Immediately Sophie had the phone on loud speaker and was acting as my secretary, retrieving the voice mail and making note of the number on a pad.

“Strange, it’s a 718 area code—is that Boston? Do you know this woman?” She paused. “Why would she want you to phone her?”

“Potential client I suppose. Never met her, but remember her name being associated with some museum in Boston. A controversial person from what I read.

Three



I pulled over to the side of the road. I liked sitting in the car at the top of the hill at the end of our street before turning into the driveway. It's from there that I can see across the valley to the peaks in the distance. At that time of day, when the sun was setting over the hills, it reflected the warmth of whatever was left in the autumn sun. The leaves had turned various colours that seemed to make them glow orange. It was spellbinding.

"Dad, why are you stopping here?"

"The colours. I like the colours. They help me remember."

"Remember what?"

"Not sure." I paused for effect. "It's obviously not working."

Then with the long drawn out inflection that only a young woman can do, she said, "I hate you when you do that. I thought you were serious. You act like a teenage boy sometimes. Are you ever going to grow up?"

At twenty-three, Sophie was practical, though she still had quite an appreciation for emotional matters, especially when compared to her fraternal twin sister. She was the sensitive one of my children.

She looked away, then back at me. I knew it wouldn't take long for her to soften.

"But then again, I'm not sure that I want you any different." She smiled. "I love you."

"I love you too," I said. But I lied. Not about loving her—I did. I loved her very much. I lied about the colours. I did remember when I saw them and I recalled the autumn I noticed them for the first time. It wasn't that I never noticed them until that year, but it was the year I met Ellen. We were in a second-hand bookshop in Northampton. She was a post-doc student at Mount Holyoke College teaching anthropology. Listening to her Scottish accent while she paid for her purchase was captivating. Later, her intellect proved seductive.

As I started the engine, Sophie asked, "Are you going to call her? She'll be getting annoyed you haven't returned her call."

Sophie would be a tough boss. “I’ll phone her after dinner.”

“I’ll tell you what, seeing as it’s Friday night, you phone her when we get home and I’ll cook. How’s that for a deal?”

I turned the Jeep onto the road, but immediately saw a car approaching. I waited. It was a black BMW with dark tinted windows. A man was driving and a woman half his age was in the passenger’s seat. It was Michael Drew. I fought back a groan. Seeing him flitting around with whatever woman took his eye confirmed my disgust.

“Dad, you okay? What you staring at?”

I wanted to say, *I’m trying to imagine Drew with a personality*. But Sophie hadn’t seen him so I made an excuse, “Oh, it was just something I need to remember to do at work on Monday.”

I drove down our long crushed-stone driveway. Ellen chose the material to remind her of her childhood house in Scotland. Over the years, I came to enjoy the ambience of the pebbled path. At the house, I turned the Jeep into the parking apron in front of the garage, pressed the remote to open the door, drove in. The phone call now lay ahead.

* * *

My personal library was in the den. I headed there while Sophie went to the kitchen. The book-lined walls provided a feeling of comfort and security. I loved reading and over the years I had built-up a fine collection. I often recalled the words of the poet Joseph Brodsky, who said, ‘There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them.’ In some ways, I felt a bit like P.D. James’ Adam Dalgliesh—a bibliophile detective.

I picked up the desk phone and dialled. It rang and I heard Yvette Kerslake’s voice. I introduced myself and apologised for missing her call. Then I listened to what was on her mind.

She told me she was a curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Art. She oversaw the American Indian collection. Then, she blurted out, “I need your help.” Her voice sounded as if she might have been crying. *Wasn’t sure if it was sorrow or despair*.

“I need you to conduct some private inquires for me. Can you come so we can talk? I need to keep this low key.” She spoke *sotto voce*, almost as if her hushed tones would keep people from finding out we had spoken.

A job outside the firm? That wasn't done. Management frowned on PIs moonlighting. But I was intrigued by who she was and wondered what it was about. I said, "Sure, when?"

"As soon as you can. Do you have. . ." she seemed to be searching for the right word, ". . .a free appointment tomorrow? In the morning, please?"

That was Saturday. I was off, but my schedule was full of personal tasks. "Yes, I'm free tomorrow morning." She started to tell me her address, but I interjected with one of my PI jokes. "I know where you live, I'm a detective."

It was meant as a bit of humour but she said, "Oh yes, of course, I should have realised. I'll see you at ten if that's okay," and rang off.

I sat holding the hand-set, then slowly replaced it in its cradle. I didn't know what to think. One thing was for sure, she was in no mood for comedy, and I now needed to find where she lived so I could uphold whatever super-sleuth image I might have just created.

So, I went online and checked the *White Pages* listing for her name. It's what intelligence analysts call 'open-source information.' And there it was. I was saved from the embarrassment of having to phone her back. While online, I searched newspaper archives for articles about her. There were a few, one with a picture. She was stunningly dressed.

"Well, what did she say?" Sophie's voice came from the kitchen.

"Were you eavesdropping?"

"I'm the daughter of a private investigator; what would make you think anything of the sort?"

"Well, is dinner ready?"

"Pour yourself a drink and tell me what she said."

There was a bottle of Glenmorangie single malt in the dining room cabinet. I poured a sizable amount into a glass and sat at the kitchen table while Sophie finished up. Coming from Scotland, Ellen always had a bottle in the house to remind of her life "back home." I maintained her tradition. I had a swallow and could feel the therapeutic effect of the alcohol in my throat.

I said, "First, tell me about your day." The burning sensation of the whiskey became more enjoyable with each sip. I knew in a few minutes that on an empty stomach I would feel the drink's full pleasurable effects. I suspected that Sophie thought so too and that's the

reason she suggested it. As she spoke, I looked at the bottle of Glenmorangie and read the distiller's description of the spirit on the back label "...alluring and very complex..." I thought of the picture I saw of Yvette Kerslake on the Internet and her call for help. I wondered about our meeting in the morning.

Four



I stood viewing the photograph that sat on the fireplace's mantelshelf. It was a studio portrait, not some holiday snapshot like the ones I stuck to the side of my refrigerator. It had an antique-looking gold gilt frame. Everything about the photo exuded privilege. This was underscored by the pearls Yvette wore. They didn't look faux. All her adornments appeared expensive.

I looked more closely at Yvette Kerslake's husband who was standing next to her. He had wide-set coal-black eyes, thick eyebrows, a stumpy nose; no smile. He wore aviator style glasses that went out of fashion with button-fly jeans; the lenses were so thick that they deformed his eyes. Perhaps he thought he was starting a new trend—some retro something-or-other look—hard to tell with artists if this type of thing reflected their view of art or it was just bad taste. Anyway, my guess was that when the cards for good looks were being dealt, he wasn't sitting at the table.

Poor guy, I thought. What could she have seen in him? It was certainly something other than physical.

Yvette Kerslake's house may have been an indication. It was a big two storey place with an attic. It was in Lincoln, one of Boston's more prestigious suburbs. *This didn't come cheap*, I thought when I parked at the curb. Gauging from the other houses in the neighbourhood, I guessed the median family income had to be more than four times that of the average taxpayer.

The place was brick with gables, the roof in the left front corner sloping down over what must have been a sitting room for welcoming guests. On the right, about midway along, was a double set of windows in what was the formal dining room—the top half lined with stained glass patterns. The driveway led to a small set of outbuildings. One had the hallmark of being a servant's quarters and the other, a more modern, all-glass design, was an art studio. There was a virgin white Mercedes-Benz C180 parked in the driveway. The license plate was

HER-180. Clearly, she enjoyed the treats that money brought—I imagined that included travel, meeting important people, and a career others could only dream of.

I wondered if her husband provided the cash to fund all this. I planned to find out.

Turning back to face her sitting on the leather Chesterfield in the living room, I probed, “So tell me about how you and Kurt met. I’m guessing it was through the Boston Museum of Fine Art. The American Indian collection? I remember seeing your photo in the newspaper when you opened the exhibit that raised a storm of controversy.” I didn’t tell her I found that information last night on the Internet.

“Kurt a descendant of the Narragansett tribe. His artwork has a large following of admirers. He’s well respected—gets glowing reviews, and his works sell well. He’s a remarkable man.”

“Is that what attracted you to him?”

“What do you mean?” she said tersely.

“Hey, I’m not the one who’s suddenly gone missing, he is, and I need to know a lot of background if I’m going to find him.” I moved to the sofa opposite her and sat down.

“Why?” she shot back. She was certainly not used to being questioned. This was a woman who would have only one gear in her car—drive. Neutral or reverse would find no appeal.

I took a breath. “Because people are people, and although they change *where* they live, they find it very hard to change *how* they live. If I can understand who he is and how he thinks, I have a better chance of finding him. Besides, how do I know this isn’t a police matter—foul play, an accident, or something else the cops will take a dim view of if I intervene without telling them?”

“No police.” Her gaze was pained, voice flat but direct.

Her body language told me she didn’t like being corrected. She was not only a woman who lived well; she was a woman who needed to be in charge. This was going to be a problem if I decided to take on her case. The management of investigations was my domain, and *I* needed to be in charge. More to the point, I thought, *What’s this all about?* So, I started to push for answers.

“Okay, let’s start with the basics. What’s his full name?” I started jotting notes into a small coil-bound pad.

“Kurt Kerslake.”

“Does he have a middle name?”

“No middle name.”

“Other names he has used over the years? Nicknames, shortened names, that sort of thing?”

“No, just Kurt—can’t shorten it beyond that.”

“Okay, but what about a ‘stage name’ or whatever artists have? Was he adopted, had another name at birth, anything like that?”

She crossed her arms, “No.”

“Hey, if you don’t give me these facts, I may decide not to take on your case. I need this information to track him down.” I also thought, *With just two names it’s going to be difficult to make a positive ID. But then again, it could be worse; he could have only one name, like Tarzan.*

“What do you mean, take on the case?” Her expression hard, voice indignant. “I thought you had. That’s why you are here isn’t it?”

“No, I am here to hear you out—you called asking for help. I know nothing of the situation surrounding his disappearance, so how could I decide to find him?” I let that sink in. “Besides, he’s not missing. Only socks go missing. So, we’re not going to find him in the laundry basket, at the bottom of a drawer, or with the last cycle of washing. He knows where he is, and I suspect others do too. It’s just us who don’t. And there’s a reason for that—he doesn’t want us to know. But I need to know why.” With some degree of ambivalence, I asked, “Does he have a girlfriend?”

With a glare, she said, “No. Certainly, not.”

Unless there’s proof either way, experience has taught me such things aren’t that certain. “Look, I’ll be blunt—how do I know he didn’t leave because you were dishing out a pile of emotional abuse? Contrary to popular belief, a lot of men suffer at the hands of their wives—shame, embarrassment, other fears. There’s no way I’m finding him if that’s the

case. I'm going to have to know more, so can we continue?" I took a quick breath, "Otherwise, I'll go to lunch and drive back to the Berkshire's along Route 20."

Her jaw clinched. Her lips pursed.

I stood, started to walk out.

Just as I got to the door she called out, "No, wait."

I turned, locked her in my stare. Her green eyes were sending a message contrary to her indignation—one of anguish.

She had striking looks, chestnut-brown hair, soft olive skin, full lips, and long shapely legs. She was tall, five foot ten, thin with smooth model-like cleavage. She could have worn anything and still looked good—an evening dress, casual slacks. The omen on the whiskey bottle last night was proving true. She was alluring, and so far, very complex.

Clearly uncomfortable with the situation, she shifted in her seat and the sofa made the low rumble that only well-oiled, well-worn leather does. Her eyes looked as if they were about to well. *Perhaps I was too harsh?* I suspected she wouldn't be receptive if I tried to break-the-ice with any of my lame PI jokes.

She said, "I'd like you to take on the case because I need all this to be confidential." Then she winced, "I don't want people finding out that he has left."

"Why me? There are dozens of private investigators in the Boston area who are more than capable of finding him—more so than me—it's not my specialty. I recover stolen manuscripts and rare edition books for insurance companies. There's a big difference." I wasn't about to tell her that since selling my PI business I was demoted to photographing cracks in sidewalks. . . .

"That's true, but I don't know the others, or their reputations. You I know; I mean, know *of* you. I know you recovered of the manuscript relating to Roger Williams for the gallery in Hartford."

"Yeah, didn't he set-up a settlement for Indians in some part of Rhode Island?"

She frowned, "A shameful event."

"Sorry?"

“His settlement was attacked in autumn of 1675 by Colonialists. The result was the Great Swamp Massacre. Over 500 killed. Mostly elderly, woman and children. It was the Narragansett tribe’s winter camp.”

Her knowing of my book recovery surprised me as did her interjection about the book’s subject.

She went on, “Not quite an accurate discourse of what took place, but an important artefact nonetheless. You were discreet in that matter, so I know you’ll treat my inquiry confidentially. Anyway, you have a reputation for success. The recovered manuscript is testament. I only found out because I’m a close friend of the gallery owner.”

I felt a flush of mixed emotions. I was flattered that she thought highly of my work, but my thoughts were beginning to drift into the shadows of what she was saying. I felt uneasy. It was the words—*No one to know? Discreet?* Her words ran through my head like dried weeds down the street of an abandoned frontier town. I needed time to think so I said, “Okay, let’s start over. Make me a coffee.”

Her shoulders dropped their defensive posture. Her breathing slowed, deepen. Her watery eyes were more composed.

“Fine, I should have offered you a drink when you arrived. I was just anxious to get things moving.”

Yes, I thought. Single minded and driven.

“Do you want something stronger?”

“Much too early for Scotch. Coffee will be fine.”

Yvette Kerslake turned to the door leading to the passageway and called out, “Isabel, please prepare coffee for two.” She turned back and asked, “How do you take it?” There was now warmth in her voice and in her smile.

“Black, strong. No sugar,” I said.

I wondered why a man could leave a woman like this. It didn’t make sense, to have a woman so concerned for your well-being, to have all the trappings of success, yet leave—just disappear? I wanted to find out.

Isabel González, her housekeeper, entered the room holding a silver tray containing a pot of coffee, milk, and sugar. She was an older woman who could have easily been a

grandmother. There were also two fine china cups, silver spoons and Czech crystal water glasses.

“Thank you, I’ll pour,” Yvette said as her housekeeper placed the tray on the table between us.

Isabel tried to set the tray down, but experienced some awkwardness—perhaps arthritis. As I listened to the exchange between her and Yvette I realised she was a native of South American, most likely Venezuela; a country with a less than stellar record when it came to human rights. Despite all the trimmings of wealth, Yvette appeared to have liberal leanings and I suspected her comment about the rare book subject suggested she supported other left-of-centre causes. I took her employing this South American woman as another indicator.

I watched Yvette pour. I noticed her hands—their colour, texture and shape. In marked contrast to her housekeeper’s, I noted there were no spots or blemishes. She had no scars that are common for people who clean and do manual tasks. Her hands were smooth, evenly tanned, and her nails manicured. The nail polish complemented her blouse. I thought, *She lives well and she treats herself to the luxuries life offers—well, that some people’s lives offer.*

Although I watched the cups being filled, my concentration moved to Yvette’s face. I could see in my peripheral vision her short hair, reminiscent of the glory days of the 1920s—bangs in the front that highlighted her long angular face. Her hair was as smooth as her skin and as well presented as the rest of her. At my age, my hair was starting to show strands of grey, but she was a few years younger than me, so her colour was likely to be natural. But that wasn’t a question to ask a woman, and certainly not one *this* PI was going to ask *this* woman.

She gazed out the window with the look of being lost in thought. She asked my rates and offered to pay me a week in advance.

“Not until I know the details,” I said.

She looked at me with her emerald eyes, “Not many people say ‘no’ to me.”

“Look, I need to get details.”

As if she was talking to herself, she muttered, “You must be discreet.”

Then, before she could explain, the housekeeper appeared at the door holding her right-hand. In an excited voice she said, “Excuse me Miss, I am very sorry, but I have injured my hand on the syringe in the trash.”

Syringe? I thought. *Okay, this is something I need to hear.*

Getting up to help Isabel, Yvette said matter-of-factly, “Kurt is a diabetic. He injects insulin.”

This seemed odd. I assumed diabetics used pens, not needles.

I followed the two of them into the kitchen where there was a first aid kit. As Yvette attended the wound—it was deep, the needle looked long and thick—I had a look around for information that might help me find Kurt. There wasn’t much hope of having a rummage through his personal things in the bedroom, so I poked my nose here and there without making it too obvious that’s what I was doing. When I looked out the window, I saw a clue—stacks of empty wine bottles piled up ready to be put out for curb-side recycling. It looked like the aftermath of a teenager’s first party, but I guessed they were Kurt’s. Things were now making sense.

“Isabel, get your coat, I’ll take you to get this looked at,” Yvette said. “Needle stick wounds are difficult to clean because they don’t bleed freely.”

When the housekeeper left the kitchen to retrieve her wrap, I pointed out the window and asked, “Kurt’s?”

Her facial expression was one of resignation. She probably realised I wasn’t about to give up until I had answers. She grimaced. “Kurt’s an alcoholic. Has been for years. He refused to get help, and now it’s too late. He has cirrhosis and liver cancer—he’s also a diabetic and has a heart condition—these are serious health issues. I need you to find him. Can you see why he needs to be home? Physically, he’s very ill.”

And mentally too to be drinking like that, I thought. “I’ll need a photograph of him.”

She walked me back to the mantel and handed me a small framed picture that looked as if it had been taken at some social event.

“I’ll need it without the frame so I can scan it for the dossier.”

“I want him, not the photo. I don’t care what happens to it,” she replied.

Cold and decisive, not romantic, I thought. I guessed she was never one to read Jane Austen. I slipped the photo out of its frame and into my folio.

As I started for the front door to let myself out, she grabbed me by the arm and said, “You’ll go about this diplomatically.”

My mind flashed to the needles. “I’ll be subtle, but I need to point out that if he is up to something illegal there is no client–investigator privilege recognised in law. The only privilege that exists is between a lawyer and his client. That privilege can be extended to me as the investigator if you were to engage one.”

She shook her head, “There’ll be no need for a lawyer. I know you’ll give me one-hundred percent.”

“I always give one-hundred percent in everything I do—except when I give blood.” My stab at humour didn’t lighten her mood, so I went on, “In the meantime, message me Kurt’s date of birth and social security number. Also, I need to know if he’s done this before and where he might go—his usual haunts. Text me those details.”

She was already making moves to take her housekeeper for medical treatment. As I closed the door to her estate, it made me reflect—PIs can move between the lowest levels of society and the highest, but the transition isn’t easy. As sad as it is seeing the troubles of people ‘on the street’ with all their overt misery, the prosperous were equally dysfunctional. The only difference was that they wore a Rolex instead of a Timex.

Five



Just after I cleared the toll-booth at the entrance of the Mass Pike, I headed west back toward East Longmeadow. I eased myself into my Jeep’s cushioned seat and felt the low rumble of the tyres as the vehicle picked up speed. Then my cell phone rang. I pressed the answer button on the steering-wheel’s hands-free control and heard Corey Granfield’s eager voice. Corey was always excited. And his enthusiasm for life was infectious.

“Hey buddy, just got an email from Lucian—he’s back from Abu Dhabi. He’ll be in town for a few days before heading off to some symposium in Norway. You free to get together tonight?”

It wasn’t a question; before I could answer he said, “Great! We’ll meet at Pozzani’s at seven. Pizza and beer. Shouldn’t, my diet, but hey, Lucian’s home.”

Corey always lifted my mood. He was the classic Good Time Charlie. He loved to eat, drink, tell jokes; but couldn’t boast the body mass index of an athlete. I acknowledged his plan and rang off.

* * *

I arrived at the appointed hour to find Corey and Lucian Trudeau had already set themselves up on stools at the bar. They were near the entrance and joking with Giacomo Pozzani, the owner. Both held brown bottles with Pabst Blue Ribbon labels. Lucian once said he liked Pabst because it reminded him of what living in the 1950s would have been like; those stylish couples that featured in the ads of magazines like *New Yorker*. And Lucian was fashionable.

Lucian worked as a management consultant to several international businesses. He lived most of the year in the United Arab Emirates, but flew around the world regularly to speak at conferences here and there—mostly in Europe. His latest wife—the third—was Gjertrud, a Norwegian he met on an overseas business trip, so I suspected this conference was part of a tax deduction for them to visit her family.

Lucian was always well-presented, tonight was no different. He wore Italian lace-less shoes, finely-woven black woollen trousers, open neck silk shirt, and a jacket that looked as if

it was tailored for him in Hong Kong. Corey was dressed like me, jeans and a sweater. We were New Englanders; sweaters suited the weather, so did jeans.

“Hello Jack,” I said as I approached the bar.

Giacomo was in his eighties and had ran the restaurant for decades. It was a family business—one of the few that survived the spread of chain-style restaurants. His daughter Micaela now ran the kitchen with her husband Enrico Romani, but Jack and his wife, Maria, were the *maitre d's*. They knew everyone in town and made it a point to know patrons' tastes and needs.

Lucian stood and shook my hand. Corey gave me a brotherly hug.

Jack turned to me and asked, “Hey, have you heard the joke about the Swiss banker and the lawyer? Tell ‘em Corey; it’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m sure he’ll tell me later,” I said and gave Jack a nod.

It was a good place to catch up. Jack had the lights low, but not so low the place looked shady. The smell of Italian sauces from the kitchen, as well as the sounds of the waiting staff as they hustled about, gave the place a welcoming atmosphere. It was a place one could sit for hours to enjoy the food, and the company.

Unlike my other long-time friends, when Corey, Lucian and I got together we didn't spend time reminiscing about old times. Those were the memories that bound us together. Instead, we discussed the future. It was always great to hear Lucian's tales of travel and the gossip of a life abroad where he moved in the circles that make the chronicles of business magazines. Corey continually came up with new business plans to sell something or other on the Internet, which usually bordered on some form of get-rich-quick scheme. He called it *entrepreneurship*. It made me think of the timeless used car dealer anecdote—“I’ll give you less for more.” Nevertheless, he had yet to file for bankruptcy and could send his two kids to private colleges in Connecticut.

As we walked over to our favourite booth, Corey said, “Lucian is heading back to Europe for a—what’s it again? Some symposium on, what?” But before Lucian could answer, he said, “Hey, never mind, it’s the usual; he’s still marketing his ideas on streamlining management practices that we know will never happen; though management always seems to want to hear about it.” He laughed and said to Lucian, “You know my offer for us to do business is always open.”

Nodding towards Corey, Lucian threw his hands in the air and turned to me. “Now that you know my latest, what’re you up to? Any big crime busts?”

“No busts, but had a call from an interesting Boston woman about a discreet private inquiry she’d like me to make. But I’m not certain I want to take on this case.” Then it struck me, “Corey, you’re a diabetic. What do you use to inject?”

“Disposable insulin pens. They don’t like selling syringes anymore. Druggies use them. Why?”

I ignored his question. “How long are the needles on insulin syringes?”

“Oh, about a quarter inch. You worried about my diet?”

“So a half inch needle would be used for—”

He finished my sentence, “Injecting drugs.”

“Thanks.” I needed to change the topic before they caught on. “I just don’t want you going into insulin shock or whatever happens when you eat and drink as much as you’re going to tonight.”

With mock aggression Corey punched my arm. “It’s a diabetic coma. But don’t worry, I split my dose, half before and half after the meal.” He frowned, “Hey, you’re starting to sound like Beth.”

“So is that the problem? This case is about drugs?” Lucian was faster on the uptake than Corey.

I felt my shoulders tighten, so I side-stepped the question, “I’m working for an employer now and moonlighting is tantamount to contempt—it would get me fired.”

“Buddy, listen, you ran your own agency for years. I know the types of operations you did; some of them risky. Why would getting fired matter to you, especially now?”

I smiled at nothing in particular. “I want to start a new life; grow old.”

The two of them leaned back, looked at me, probably not knowing what to make of my statement. I thought about Rose and being with her. Life could be nice; comfortable, easy, fun again. I thought about going on that European tour.

Lucian broke the silence. “Well, you’ll need money to do that. So, ask yourself this: Is this client paying? Well, I’ll answer that—she is, so it’s commerce. Don’t worry about that

firm you're working for, take on the case, do the job, bank the money. It's what we call *business*."

"Hey, if you paid him for that advice it would have cost you the high end of three figures," Corey laughed.

Lucian said, "Four. Granted the low end of four, but four nonetheless," and the two of them chuckled.

Maria walked by the table on her way to greet a newly arriving group but stopped to say hello. She acknowledged Lucian with a motherly kiss—*must have been his Italian shoes*—and Corey and me with warm embraces.

I thought Maria's well-timed interruption might divert the conversation, but it didn't.

"Listen 'Mike Hammer,' even if you don't want to imitate Amos Burke—the millionaire LA Police detective who drove around in his Rolls-Royce—you still need dough to start this new life you're planning," Lucian reminded me.

It was typical of him to couch his advice in a chic image, but Corey could always bring the conversation back to basics. He was like a terrier with a rat. "New life means a new woman." He raised his eyebrows, his eyes twinkled.

"Okay, I'm attracted to someone. And before I get cross-examined by you two, I'll lay out the facts: she's local, my age, you don't know her, and she's widowed. She's a nice person. Good company. Friendly. And I hope, soon, she'll be more than that."

With a big grin, Corey said, "Wow, sounds like *love* to me."

With my chin raised, I said, "Yep, I think so." But as I said that, I wondered if it was love or just the memory of love.

"So, when do we meet this mystery woman?" pestered Corey. "Hey, next time we should bring the girls. Good opportunity to meet her."

I looked at my beer going flat, I couldn't get my mind of Yvette, *Should I be taking on her case?*

Corey told a joke about not enjoying snails with his meals because he preferred fast food, but we just groaned at the punch line.

“Okay, okay, so you heard that one. Well what about the time I bought Beth the wrong birthday present?” he asked. “She told me not to buy her anything expensive—so I didn’t—and I ended up sleeping in the guest room for the next two nights.”

“There’s no doubt women are smarter than men, but we still have the advantage because we’re too dumb to know that,” I said as I excused myself to go to the men’s room.

Corey advice about the syringe left me unsettled. The image of Kurt’s needle was vivid in my mind’s eye. Yvette Kerslake’s devotion to finding the man who abandoned her was equally unsettling. I wanted to meet her husband and ask him what the hell he was thinking when he walked out on a woman like her.

On my way back, I passed Jack and he asked if we needed anything else. I leaned against the bar and told him we were very comfortable. I looked into his aging face—a face that seemed to know a lot about life—“Jack, what would you say to someone like me who’s looking for a new partner?”

He smiled. “Listen, there’s no life after death. All this nonsense you hear about near-death experiences only feeds the thinking of crazy people that there’s another life waiting for us when we die. I think it gives them hope—the possibility for something better. But that thinking takes away the beauty of living.” He swept his hand across the restaurant indicating all the people enjoying themselves. “We need to make the best of what we’ve got while we’ve got it. You need to love someone and experience that love for all it’s worth, and help that person experience love too.” His eyes widened, “The remedy for a love lost is a new love. We don’t get a second chance.” He winked. “But you didn’t hear that from this good Catholic. And, I’ll never admit saying that in the confessional.”

In my line of business, it’s not what the secret is that matters, it’s what you do with that information. That’s what defines a PI. So, I told him his secret was safe with me and returned to the booth.

Corey and Lucian were imitating what looked like two sharks in a feeding frenzy. The pizzas had arrived and the smell of the rich tomato sauce, roasted green peppers, garlic, and pepperoni was overpowering. As I ate I reflected on Jack’s advice. I knew Ellen wouldn’t be back. All I had was her memory. We experienced good things. Although her life had ended, mine was going on. I daydreamt about Rose but questioned myself, *Was it love?*

Any affectionate feelings I had seemed to have for her vanish when I walked to my Jeep. As I inserted the key into the ignition switch, a set of headlights crossed my car as

another vehicle entered the parking lot. While the Jeep warmed up, I looked in the direction of the vehicle and saw two people getting out, heading to Pozzani's. It was Drew and the woman with him was Rose Kozynski. If I believed in astrology, I suspect my horoscope would have started by saying, "Are you sitting down?"

Six



Even after mulling it over on Sunday, Monday morning didn't clear my thinking about Yvette Kerslake's case. She was being guarded about Kurt's details, only messaging me the information I asked for, nothing more. The question of what would make a man walk out on such a devoted person raised my curiosity. Regardless, on Sunday my thoughts were being occupied by another challenge—ambushing Michael Drew. And of course, there was the boring work awaiting me at the Agency lurking in the background.

Even so, my interest about this man without a smile was strong, so while I put coffee on to brew I thought I'd at least conduct a basic search just to see what information was out there. I started with an Internet query and was soon joined by Sophie carrying two mugs of black coffees. "What ya doing?"

"Having a look at what the Boston case might involve."

"So, you still haven't made up your mind?"

"No. It's complicated."

"Can't be. Searching the Internet isn't that difficult. You want some help?" She tried to nudge me off my chair.

I resisted the shove. "Searching isn't complicated, the client's complicated. I mean, my thoughts about the client's case are complicated."

She stared at me with an expression of bewilderment.

I clasped my hands, "Look, I'm just not sure I want to take on this job."

"Okay, it's all the same to me," she said and wandered back into the kitchen. I could smell croissants being warmed.

I typed Kurt's name into the search engine. I thought I'd get a feel for the scale of the problem I might face. Sometimes finding a missing person is a job for more than one person. There was no point in doing the other usual 'first steps' that the *Missing Persons Manual 101* would advocate—if there was such a handbook—like doing a *White Pages* search, because

this wasn't that type of case. There was also little point in logging into any of the specialised databases that were available to me for skip tracing at this stage until I know more. So, I just did an Internet search as a way of gauging the size of the information universe on Kurt Kerslake. I needed to see what was out there.

When doing this type of search there are two results that bring me dread: a 'no results found for. . .' and an endless stream of hits. This time, after pressing the enter key my screen flashed with only a dozen results.

This is pleasing, I thought. It was just enough information to generate some leads, but not so many that I'd never be able to hunt down every one.

As I scrolled down the entries, I mentally ticked off what Yvette had texted me against what was coming up on my screen. Social media sites showed he'd been a long-time patron of a few Boston bars. I made a note of their names and addresses and the nights he drank at them. *Might have to use a pretext and see who'll talk.*

I scrolled further, coming across a few blogs where he had discussed his political views. His ramblings were on Native Americans and how the Federal Government 'stole' their land, how there was some place that no government knew about, and how Indigenous peoples of the world could go there to escape oppression.

I made notes in the hope that these too might develop some leads, but I suspected that if such a place existed, the IRS would have passed a law declaring it an illegal tax haven. Not many people are fond of the Federal Government, but I would have thought the political debate would have moved on from anachronistic arguments.

I reread his statements. He didn't seem to be acting normally. *Was he drunk when he typed this or was this some sort of fringe political view?* It sounded a bit loony. Yvette's left leanings dovetailed with this theory. I made some notes.

There were websites and blogs about his artwork, very positive; only the odd disgruntled critic. I wasn't an art aficionado so I couldn't evaluate the reviews, but I did recall Yvette saying his work was well received and selling. Judging from her lifestyle it was likely to be true. Then again, it could have all been purchased on credit. For a minute I thought I should do a credit check on the Kerslakes, but Kurt's anti-government comments were more intriguing. I dismissed the critics' views—*who was I to pass judgment on some artist's work when I liked Salvador Dali?* What did Henry David Thoreau say about art: 'It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.'

Then I saw *it*. It was one of those one-in-a-thousand discoveries a PI stumbles across. Normally, PIs waste hours pounding shoe leather or sitting endlessly in a car with a long-lensed camera—and nothing happens. It’s what we call the ‘all leads lead to nowhere syndrome.’

It wasn’t on the main results web page—I had followed a few links to subsidiary pages where people talked about his art and political muses. I could have easily overlooked the link, but by chance I clicked on it.

It was a blog by an Australian Aboriginal group in what they called the outback. I knew from my wife’s work as an anthropologist that the outback was the remote inland area of Australia where there were no people, or so few people that it didn’t matter counting them. It was always a fascinating idea that a continent about the size of the United States had such vast uninhabited area. I suspected with good reason that the inhospitable terrain was the answer.

The blog had lots of loosely related postings about local community issues, but there were some statements about land rights. *We have a common theme here about the politics concerning ‘stolen land,’* I thought and made more notes in Kurt’s dossier. But what grabbed my attention was the photo posted on the blog page: those wide-set black eyes, thick eyebrows, stumpy nose, and those 1970s-style aviator eyeglasses. Unmistakable. It was him. But his eyes looked puffy, like someone who drank a lot. Yvette was right, he wasn’t well.

I placed the cursor over the photo and right-clicked to save it into a new folder. I then opened it up using a piece of software that allowed me to enhance different aspects of the picture. It was the background I wanted to look at; it was most telling because it set the context for where it was taken. Like people having their picture taken in front of the USS Massachusetts, you know instantly that they were at Fall River. For photos taken of people at social gatherings, though, the photographer isn’t interested in the background, just the people. They’re blind to the background. It’s this oversight that can produce valuable leads for a PI.

The photo appeared to have been taken on the side of a dirt road with a few Aboriginal men standing around talking. One was on horseback. There was a Nissan *Exterra* off to the side, but its licence plate could just be seen in the frame. I zoomed in. It said South Australia in small letters across the bottom and listed seven characters—the letter S then three numbers followed by three letters. This was a firm lead. With this data I could find out who he was with and where they were.

I typed the words South Australia and the number plate into the search engine and hit the enter key.

The word “Arkaroola” appeared. Now I *was* intrigued. But I suddenly realised I’d be late for work, so I phoned Stoner.

He exploded, yelling, “You’re supposed to be photographing the sidewalk for that law firm now. The lawyer and the plaintiff are waiting!”

I glanced at my watch to discover that my ‘quick search’ took well over an hour, I was late and I still hadn’t had my croissant.

“Hey, I had some personal matters to sort out. I’ll be there as soon as I can, let ‘em know,” I said.

“You might be taking more time off than you think.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You heard me. Do you need me to spell it out?”

I cracked my knuckles, “Fuck you, Stoner.”

“What!” I could imagine his eyes protruding.

“You heard me. Do you need *me* to spell it out? F U—”

“You’ve overstepped the mark.”

“Not yet I haven’t—*this* oversteps the mark,” and I let him have it: “If you were any more stupid, you’d have to be watered twice a week along with the office plants. I quit! Stick the job in the crack of your ass and photograph *that* for the lawyers.”

I cut the call.

Seven



I phoned Yvette Kerslake and said, “I found him. Well, sort of. I know where he was recently, anyway.”

She began to stutter, “You have! That’s wonderful news. Where? What’s he doing? Please bring him home. Today? Now?”

The questions were flying at me like a shower of meteors in a science fiction movie.

“Steady. It’s just a progress report to see what you want to do.”

Her tone was sharp, “You need to go and get him.”

“Well that’s going to be a problem,” I said and I sucked a breath into my lungs. I could feel that this wasn’t going to be a simple discussion. “First, I have no authority to bring anyone back from anywhere—that’s called kidnapping. Second, I think he’s in Australia and the last time I looked at the map, it was big place, a long way from here. Third, you haven’t hired me yet—I need more than the usual one-week retainer.”

The line went silent. *Was it the retainer?* She offered one week in advance when we met, so I couldn’t imagine that asking for two weeks’ pay would be a problem. She appeared to have plenty. *Maybe I should have done a credit check?*

Her voice came back on the line. It was more controlled and deliberate. “Australia? What’s he doing?”

Okay, it wasn’t the money. “Not sure, but it looks like he’s meeting with some Australian Aborigines. The words ‘land rights’ mean anything to you?”

“We need to talk.”

“Yep, that’s what we are doing right now.”

“No, you need to come here so we can talk.” Her voice was becoming shrill, bordering on what sounded like distress.

There was little chance of her phone being bugged or people watching her, so I wasn't sure why I needed another drive to Boston. Still, she was a person who needed to be in control and this was too emotional an incident to try to discuss rationally over the phone. Anyway, I thought it would be good to collect my retainer now that I had quit my job—the notion that I still needed to pay the upcoming winter's heating bill didn't occur to me when I vented my spleen on Stoner.

“Sure, I'll be there by noon. Cash is king, so stop at the bank, and—”

“—Yes, I know, I'll have a black coffee ready. I have cash. Just come.”

* * *

“How do you know he's in Australia?” she asked. Her tone short.

I opened my briefcase and took out the dossier. In it was the photo I printed from the Internet. I had circled the enlargement of the Nissan's license plate number.

She looked at it and studied the people before she read the plate number. “South Australia. How soon can you go?”

“Whoa. Let's take a step back. Why would he be in Australia? Who are these people? He obviously knows them. Look at the way they're standing around talking. They look like they're friends.”

“I don't really know, but I suspect he is involved in some business venture.”

“What are you talking about? Business? Do you mean he's selling artwork? Giving art lessons? You didn't mention a business interests before other than his art.” I lowered my voice, and leant forward. “You need to tell me the truth. What's happening? What's with the syringes?”

She swallowed. “He's got a drinking problem. When some people drink they get happy. When others drink, they want to fight—.”

“—I know,” I said, “the remaining drunks just breakdown and cry.”

“I wish it was that simple. When Kurt drinks—and it's often—he talks politics. He gets serious, worked up, agitated. He contests the notion of class egalitarianism. His discussions can become quite undignified. I'm afraid that after years of drinking his ability to reason has been weakened. Combine that with his artist's intense imagination, his feelings for nostalgic tribal ways, and—” She looked out the window.

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. Australian Aborigines have a long standing petition with their federal government for some kind of recognition in their constitution for the land that they say was never ceded to colonial settlers. You think he is involved in some sort of political activism with these people?”

“He was fixated about land rights; being free of government meddling.” She shook her head, “I never thought he’d do anything like this.”

“So, I take it that that was a ‘yes’, he’s talked about Australia?”

She looked back at me. “Yes. Over the years, he’s been invited to speak to Indigenous peoples in Canada and Central America. So, his talking to Australian Aborigines about this type of thing doesn’t come as a surprise. He raised the possibility over a year ago, but I never thought anything would come of it.”

“Fine, let’s work with the hypothesis that he’s in Australia meeting with Aborigines involving the land rights movement. Why would he leave and not tell you—just disappear?”

“He’s done this before because he knows I’d stop him. But each time I had an idea where he might be and I brought him home. Mostly Canada. Those absences were easy to explain. But now he’s on the verge of ruining his reputation. He could jeopardise his standing by getting involved in these issues. They are not mainstream politics he’s preaching; they’re—”

I thought about the blog post and finished her sentence. “They’re on the lunatic fringe. Come on, who believes there’s a lost world where Indigenous people can live free?” I resisted adding, ‘Without the IRS knowing.’

She glared at me. My words had found their mark. She snapped back, fire in her voice, “Are you referring to the crimes committed against American Indians, driven from their land, sacred pray sites desecrated, hunted almost to extermination? White invasion resulted in obliteration.”

I steadied myself. I knew I was in for a broadside.

“He has wounds. Wounds of the heart. He lives in a wilderness of emotional pain. That’s the reason for the syringes. Traditionally, some American Indians used mescaline for rituals. Now, people use it as a way to look at ordinary things differently; to see beauty where it was overlooked, or ugliness where no one thought it existed. Some people used it to

allow their minds to drift, to be creative. Kurt read that it could be used to treat alcoholism. He couldn't get it, so he used some other kind of hallucinogenic.”

I let her tidal wave of emotion wash over me. She seemed to need to project an illusion of a life of quaint pleasantness; it was in keeping with the image of an art gallery curator. She clearly needed to fashion a life of tranquil comfort while entertaining her non-mainstream political thoughts. But the lecture on the mescaline rituals sounds like crazy talk to a practical guy like me.

I looked around the room. The signs were there—the furniture, the soft furnishings, the artwork on the walls, and the photographs on the fireplace mantel, the way she dressed, her manner—it all made sense. Kurt was the vehicle for this lifestyle; he offered her the ways and means to achieve what she desired while dabbling in leftist politics.

So, I was right, it wasn't his looks. She wanted—needed—to bring him home to save public face. Or, more precisely I thought, to save herself from being disgraced. Either way, she wanted me to retrieve him. I suspected that any PI agency she approached would have turned down her request. Perhaps they had and that's why she contacted me through her gallery friend.

What do I say? I had the retainer in my wallet; I could tell her 'yes,' have a trip to Australia, see a few iconic sights, have my picture taken with a koala, come back and tell her I wasn't successful. Or I could charge her for the work I had done, hand back the rest, and wish her all the best.

I looked her square on, ready to give back the money, tell her she needed another PI. But when I looked into her green eyes, I stopped. Her short chestnut coloured bangs accentuated a desperate portrait in them. Women can be vulnerable. Even this one. Body armour can't stop all bullets and this woman's emotional armour was looking like a colander.

I buckled, “Sure, I'll go. I'll see what I can do. But I'll be honest; it'll be expensive and there's no guarantee of success.”

“Money's not a problem.”

She stood up and walked to the door, asking as she went, “You do have a passport?”

“Yep.” I had travelled to Scotland with Ellen several times.

“Good, email me the number and I'll make the flight reservations and get the visa you'll need online. I assume you'll want to fly Qantas—a superb airline with an impeccable

safety record. It's the one I fly with when I travel the Pacific." She paused. "You'll need to work out where to go once you are in-country and where you'll stay."

"The capital of South Australia is Adelaide, so I need to fly there. I'll conduct some more background investigations before I go to see if I can get a better fix on where he is exactly. South Australia is twice the size of Texas, so there'll be a lot of real estate to look at if I don't narrow it down. I need to work out where this place *Arkaroola* is in relation to Adelaide, and how I get there."

"That retainer isn't going to go far, so let me increase it and I'll do an electronic transfer today."

Money sure isn't an issue, I thought. Makes a change from working for insurance companies—I needed a crowbar to separate them from the money they owned me.

I cleared my throat. "We need to talk about the realities of bringing him home."

She looked at me the way a defiant child would look at a parent.

"I'll take you through the situation and highlight the problems—and there's a bucket load of them."

I drew a breath, "*If* I find him, I can't arrest him—he hasn't done anything wrong in relation to the law. If I was to somehow detain him, then I'd be up for a charge of kidnapping, false imprisonment, or whatever the Australian authorities have on their statute books. But whatever laws they have it means me going to jail, so that's out. Even if I was some kind of James Bond, I'd have the problem of how to transport him secretly to the airport. Picture it—I'd be escorting a handcuffed and blindfolded man—no doubt with duct tape over his mouth—through the Immigration and Customs control points. Australia is an island continent a long, long way from Massachusetts. If I find him, he'll have to *want* to come home. Otherwise, it's a waste of your money and my time." I looked at her to see if that registered. "You still want me to do it?"

She seemed to be forcing herself to sit still, "I'll electronically transfer the funds this afternoon. I'll email you your e-ticket details."

As I walked to my Jeep my thoughts should have been on generating a plan to find Kurt Kerslake, but they were drifting back to Rose and Drew. Taking on this case meant the man in the black BMW would be a step ahead. He was a smooth talker, and I didn't need Sophie to point out the clock was ticking.

Eight



After landing at New York's JFK Airport on Tuesday morning, I made my way through the terminal to the departure gate; I was looking for Qantas flight QF108—destination Sydney, Australia. The flight had one stop in Los Angeles.

Having first cleared security and immigration, I arrived at the gate just in time. My flight to New York started at Bradley International Airport, which was the closet airport to East Longmeadow. It was situated mid-way between Hartford, Connecticut and Springfield, Massachusetts, and closer than Boston's Logan Airport.

While I was in the departure lounge at Bradley, Sophie texted me. She said that Rose and Drew were off to Europe. It must have come up at the cinema last night because when Sophie went to the delicatessen for her morning coffee, Rose told her. Sophie said she hid her shock and feigned joy, but texted me as soon as she could get away from the scrum of cackling women that milled around Rose. I appreciated Sophie leaving off what could have been a PS—'I told you so.'

If today was a fish, I think would've thrown it back. But I knew the risks of taking on this case. Standing in the boarding line gave me time to reflect. I thought perhaps it wasn't deep affection I felt for Rose; perhaps it was only what I recalled love to be. Somewhere inside those thoughts, I knew Rose wasn't for me. Otherwise, I wouldn't be standing in line.

With shuffling footsteps, I inched forward in the queue for Qantas economy passengers. The line was long, so I resigned myself for a bit of a wait.

I flipped through the pages of my passport and saw the visa stamps for the United Kingdom—the last one was six years ago, when Ellen and I last visited her family in Scotland. It was the year before she passed away. I was reminiscing about our trip when my eye caught the figure of a woman in the adjacent business class line. *Yvette?*

The woman showed the Qantas steward her boarding pass and passport and moved through to the aerobridge. It felt as if my legs were trapped in swamp mud—I wanted to race

and catch her, but couldn't move. Knowing what airport security was like in this age, if I did, I'd be hauled into the security office and questioned.

So, I waited. I'd see her after boarding and find out what the hell she was doing. *She must be haemorrhaging money if she can drop everything and fly business class to Australia.*

Minutes later I made my way to my seat on the Boeing 747 and placed my netbook computer in the overhead locker. While I was sorting out my back pack, I sensed someone standing next to me so I moved out of the way. Instead I heard Yvette's voice.

"I was going to tell you, but you must have had your cell phone switched off. Anyway, I'm coming with you. You won't have to kidnap him—I'll convince him he needs to come home."

"Shh, Yvette! Some words should never be uttered on an aircraft—*kidnap* is one—please be subtle."

"Listen, I'm sitting up front—I'll see you when we land in Sydney. We'll talk while we wait for our connecting flight to Adelaide."

"Business class? Very convenient. Was that so I can't go forward and tell you my thoughts on having you tag along?"

She didn't answer, just strolled up the narrow aisle. I had to save my lecture about her unpredictable behaviour for when we arrived.

As I rummaged through my backpack for a copy of an old E. Howard Hunt spy thriller, I heard the words, "G'day mate," coming from a deep sultry voice. She had an accent I hadn't heard before. I looked up and saw a woman in a pink western-style shirt, matching pink cowgirl hat, and black denim jeans. She was older than me; perhaps five years.

In a bubbly voice that reminded me of Dolly Parton she asked, "You going to sit down or what?"

"Sorry." Despite my six-foot frame, I tried to melt into the seat for the twenty-three-hour flight Down Under.

"No worries mate, I'm keen to get moving. I've been away three months and just want to get home; know what I mean?" She flung her carry-on bag and hat into the vacant space in the overhead locker and slammed it closed.

A no-nonsense woman, I thought.

We were the only two sitting in our row of three on the starboard side. She sat on the aisle and I was in the middle. After we were airborne and the seatbelt sign was off, I indicated to her that I'd move to the window seat so she could have more room. I was about to settle into the tempo of waiting-out the back-to-back trans-continental/trans-Pacific flights, when she said, "Name's Faye Bellcroft," and stuck out her hand. She had a sturdy grip. I was impressed. Most people just want to put on a set of noise-cancelling headphones, but it looked as if she wasn't interested in the in-flight entertainment and wanted some company.

I introduced myself. She told me she was an entertainer who had landed a contract to sing Australian folk songs on a cruise liner sailing the Mediterranean; it had stopped in ports across North Africa. She was flying home via New York because she wanted to buy a special guitar brand there—the name didn't mean anything to me. I pretended to understand when she described the guitar's strings and fret spacing's.

"I was excited—this was a big gig for me, not many Australian women get that kind of chance, but once we were out to sea I realised I couldn't swim. See, I come from a place that only has ten inches of rain a year. The ground is so dry, when it does rain, the place floods." She laughed. "Forget about seasickness, that's nothing if you're afraid of drowning. It took me a week to muster the courage to go on deck, I was so scared of what would happen if I fell overboard."

I nodded knowingly, but having grown up with ponds, lakes, and rivers, I could swim well; never feared water. I couldn't really relate to her phobia.

"You heard about that cruise ship the *Costa Concordia*, ran aground on rocks off the coast of Italy? That would have been my worst nightmare."

I sensed this was a real issue for her and she was glad to be going home. *That would have been horrible—three months on a swaying ship knowing you couldn't swim to save yourself.*

"I don't know much about cruises, only what I've read in travel brochures."

"Can you swim?"

"Yeah, sure can. I'm a certified scuba diver."

"Cruises used to be a place for the newlywed, overfed, and almost dead. And it hasn't changed. It's like a nursing home that sails." She started to bounce in her seat. "I subscribe

to Dorothy's philosophy 'there's no place like home,'" and she cast an unfocused gaze out the window.

* * *

As the minutes turned into hours and many hours passed, the dull boredom of the long-haul flight set in. I could see what Faye meant about there being no place like home. It all looks exciting in the vacation leaflets, but they never tell you about the flying. Nevertheless, I wasn't doing this for relaxation; it was work. I wondered what kind of man Kurt would prove to be when I tracked him down.

We talked on and off during the flight about lots of things—from horoscope signs to whether there was a God—but mainly about Faye's work and her new life when she got home. She said she had a light-bulb moment; wanted to complete her high school equivalency and study education at university. She seemed to need to vent. It was strange because as I listened, I began to feel an attraction to this determined woman. I looked at her face. It was covered with freckles, stretching from cheek to cheek like a constellation of stars. There was sincerity in her words and the way she presented. I got the impression that she played no emotional games.

Later, after we were served dinner, Yvette appeared at the end of the row. "Comfortable?"

I wanted to tell her what I thought of her travel arrangements, but having that approach not work well with Stoner, I reconsidered and decided to save it until I submitted my final invoice. "Sure, no complaints."

"Okay, just checking before I go to sleep. I'll have the steward bring you your usual." She smiled and cast a catty glance at Faye, then she was gone.

I wasn't comfortable with that exchange and I could tell that Faye was less than impressed with the look she received—she was no doubt trying to work out our relationship, especially after Yvette's 'bring you your usual' remark. I suspected that Faye realised Yvette wasn't someone I'd met in the departure lounge to compare travel tips.

"So, what are you doing in Australia?" By the way she said it, she might as well have added, *with her*.

"I'm in real estate. I'm helping her find some property. She's my client." It was partly true—I was helping her find 'some property'—which just happened to be her husband. The

real estate slant was what PIs use all the time—a *pretext*. It's a polite way of lying. In my case, I'd like to consider what I said was demonstrating *discretion*.

"Hmm, she looks like she spends her days obsessing about what nail polish she'll wear." She turned up her mouth. "Looks like a fifty-pairs-of-shoes girl to me. But you don't look like that kind of guy."

I shrugged, "She pays my invoice." I could see Faye didn't like her. She seemed to me to be a good judge of character and I added that to the list of impressive qualities about her. After Yvette's display of bad manners, any thought that this trip was going to be enjoyable was jettisoned along the aircraft's vapour-trail. I wanted to reunite Yvette with Kurt and get back home . . . like Dorothy. But this woman sitting beside me had a magnetic pull that I could almost feel.

Minutes later a flight steward appeared with a large tumbler containing a very generous amount of Scotch whiskey. Next to it was a small bowl of ice cubes. He winked, "Someone special sent this back for you. Would you like ice?"

"No thanks, I'll have it as it is. As I reached for the glass I felt the awkwardness this was going to present for Faye—and anyway, it is lonely drinking without a partner. So I added, "Oh, she was going to order two drinks, one for my travelling companion here," and I indicated Faye with a polite tilt of my head.

The steward, who must have thought I was in some romantic relationship with Yvette, seemed dumbstruck. Trying to keep his composure, he forced a smile, "Of course sir, my oversight. I'll bring that straight away. Whiskey, ma'am?"

"Rum. Cuban if you've got it. Like him, neat, no ice," came her words without hesitation. She reached across the vacant seat and squeezed my arm. "You Yanks went without Cuban rum for decades. That trade embargo thingy you slapped on those poor little Communists devils back in the 60s just because they wanted to incinerate your country. You don't know what you've missed for all those years."

We drank and had another. I tried her rum and she was right. Unlike Scotch—complex and alluring—this was smooth, potent, and euphoric. We talked until the cabin lights were switched off. As I drifted off to sleep my thoughts were of her touch. I recalled the feeling of Rose's hand when I picked up Sophie. I wanted to believe Faye's wasn't friendship, but *affection*. But with my recent run of bad luck it was likely to be some dreamy illusion that my alcohol-fuelled mind had generated; like one of those romantic painters' landscapes.

As I felt myself succumbing to sleep I was awash with the urge to hold her, to run my hands over her skin, feel her arms around me. In those moments just before sleep took hold, my runaway thoughts stirred desire in me. Faye triggered something in me more profound than anything I ever felt for Rose. This was more than a memory of love. It was the difference between being in love, and loving someone.

* * *

The crew switched on the cabin lights. I was awake, their movement moments earlier disturbed me. I don't sleep well at the best of times, but on an aircraft, less so. And having a few strong drinks probably didn't help.

Faye moved, adjusted the thin blue blanket she was wrapped in and looked around; her gaze finally settling on me.

I smiled. "Good morning. Hope you slept well. Coffee?"

She took the edge of the blanket and rubbed her eyes. She was without pretence as if we had known each other a long time. She didn't have a young face, but when I looked at her at that hour of the morning, it had a tender appearance.

Suddenly, her face exploded into a bright smile. "You're the first bloke I've slept with that's been decent to me in the morning. Usually, they're hung over, bad tempered and smelling like—" Her eyes searched my face, "You know. I've never had a bloke offer *me* coffee."

Slept with her? I gave her a bashful grin. I suppose I did, even if it was a stretch of the truth. I wondered where this was going, so I indulged her. But I must admit, after last night's thoughts the picture she painted of us together was provocative.

The Qantas steward appeared at the end of our row holding a small tray in one hand and a pot in the other, "Coffee?"

She reached across the vacant seat that separated us, grabbed my hand and said, "You did mean it," and laughed. Returning her attention to the steward she said, "No dear, I take tea, but thanks." He poured me a long black and moved on. As I sipped the rich bitter liquid my heart raced with the thought she'd sown. The feel of Faye's hand on mine sent a tingle of magic through me.

"You staying in Australia long; like a lifetime? I could use a bloke like you in my life. Can you fix things or do you work in that real estate office?"

To my surprise, I heard myself say, “I’m a Renaissance man,” but before I could explain a stewardess materialised with the breakfast trays with all the commotion that accompanied serving, so the discussion was lost. But there was no doubt I was finding Faye captivating. There’s nothing more beautiful than discovering an honest person.

* * *

When the aircraft came to a halt at the terminal in Sydney, passengers were busy getting ready to disembark. Bags were being pulled from the overhead lockers and the aisles filling with travellers. I asked, “Where do you live?”

She stopped what she was doing and faced me, “You asking to see me again? Hey, I live in the ‘bush.’ Someplace you’ve never heard of, or ever will.”

“The bush?”

“Yep, where I come from is back-of-beyond. A place where two cars arriving at an intersection at the same time is considered a traffic jam.” She looked at me, “You’re a great listener; attentive, thoughtful. I had a good time talking to you, but where I live, it wouldn’t be your comfort zone. Anyway, you’re wearing a wedding ring. I never get involved with married men,” and she motioned with her head toward the business class cabin. “She’s lucky. Real lucky. Too bad we didn’t meet before you two did. I’m in need of a good bloke.”

I’d worn my wedding ring for so long that I never gave it any thought. *How dumb am I?* This meeting new woman stuff wasn’t coming naturally. “Yeah, I’m wearing a ring, but—”

She shrugged, “Look, she’s not your sister. So, who is she?”

“I told you, she’s my client.” Like Pinocchio, I could feel my nose growing. I wasn’t sounding convincing, not even to myself.

“Client? What? What sort of client?”

“I’m helping her find some property.”

“Oh sure, and I believe in the Tooth Fairy too. Look, I work in the entertainment industry. I hear all sorts of stories from all sorts of people and I can tell you yours doesn’t stack up. Anyway, I’m not going to push it, but I’ll let you in on a secret; whatever it is you’re doing, that wedding ring makes you look like you’re trying to have a bit of fun.” She flashed a cynical sneer.

We were moving with the crush of people exiting the aircraft, I had to talk fast. “I’m not married. I was. I’m a widower. My wife died five years ago. I miss her a lot, that’s why I still wear the ring. I’m a bit rusty at this type of thing, I’m not used to—”

Before I could finish she said, “Darling, I can see you’re a soft-hearted bloke, but you know what, I need a practical guy around my house because I’m going back to study. I want someone I can talk to, but more importantly, someone I can trust; not someone who’ll play with my mind.” Her face beamed with compassion, but like the clouds drifting overhead, she disappeared across the aerobridge and into the crowded terminal. She was gone.

Nine



I could see Yvette ahead of me in the custom's line. Being in business class she exited first, moving rapidly through the queue. Being an economy passenger, I was in a holding pattern. But once inside the terminal, I found Yvette waiting.

She gave me a curt nod, "I want to do some shopping, so let's meet at the Qantas Lounge. I'm allowed to admit a guest; we can talk there."

My head needed some time to think about what just happened with Faye. I was still smarting from Drew's *tour de force* and Faye's rebuff left me with a wound that I was sure would leave a deep scar.

I wondered what Sophie would have advised. Perhaps talking about it with her on Skype would take away the pain. I was out of my depth with this dating stuff. And, as much as I wanted to get to the bottom of what Yvette was doing here, I didn't feel like having an argument about her stowing away, so I said, "Sure, I'll have a look around too."

We walked along the concourse in different directions. Her fast-paced stride taking her to some brand-name fashion boutique.

As I listened to flight boarding announcements over the PA system, I decided I needed to think like a chess player. I needed an offence to neutralise Yvette's check. I had walked only a few paces when it came to me. I thought it through a couple of times and was happy with my plan, but I'd need to wait. Like in chess, timing is everything in achieving checkmate.

* * *

Although airport shops aren't indicative of the country, they do reflect life in the wider community, so Sydney Airport was interesting in that regard. I took an instant liking to the way Australians moved and interacted. They were friendlier than Americans—more likely to greet you with a smile or a 'G'day.' And people called me *mate* even though we'd never met before. I liked the country; it seemed to be a place that was in less of a hurry. The Australian accent was very much different from the English accents I was used to hearing when I

travelled to the United Kingdom with Ellen. And it was *very* different to Ellen's Scottish accent. Just from my brief encounter with Faye, I realised that Australians, like Americans, had unique idioms, so when I saw an Australian slang dictionary in the concourse book shop, I bought it.

There were a few other books I saw on travel destinations within Australia and one on the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. It was a large picture book with historical facts and commentary, including Arkaroola. I thumbed through it, snapping photos of noteworthy pages using my smartphone's camera. It was less conspicuous than writing notes and faster. I was conscious that if the salespeople saw me, they might make a point of telling me they weren't in business to be my personal library.

During the Cold War days of the spy-game, operatives used miniature cameras to secretly photograph documents using roll film. Now, with a cell phone with a two-fifty-six gigabyte micro-SD card, a person could steal a truckload of information, never having to change a roll of film.

There was a book on Australian wildlife that I thought worthy of a quick look. But when I browsed the pages at the end that discussed the venomous critters, it made me flinch. Amongst the varieties of spiders and biting and stinging insects there were snakes! I hated snakes and couldn't even hold the book knowing there were photos of them. It was an irrational fear, but a fear all the same. I then could relate to Faye's fear of drowning. In all my years of living in Massachusetts, I only saw one snake, that was a garter snake. Garters have never been known to kill a human because their venom is so mild and their mouths not well suited to biting big animals—like people. It's the way they move and their expressionless faces that make them look so evil.

I closed the book and went to wait at the entrance to the Qantas Lounge. Yvette appeared with a bag stencilled with R.M. Williams and waved me in. When we were in the lounge, she showed me her purchase. Originally, he was a saddler and maker of stockmen's accessories, now his company catered for trendy urbanites. In her bag was a pair of boots.

"What's this about?" I asked as I couldn't help thinking she was trying to imitate Faye in some jealous way.

"I need to blend in. Isn't that what PIs do? Blend in?"

I recalled Faye's throwaway line about her footwear collection. I wonder if this pair made fifty-one, two, or three. . . There was no doubt that Yvette had an eye for fashion—her

tall angular features made her look stunning. But her attitude was a concern. I suspected it was a tactic to avoid discussing why she came.

It was time to spring my trap. “So you were going to explain being here?” I said, interrupting her fashion show.

She reached for her glass of sauvignon blanc and rested back in the armchair. “Look, you said it yourself; Kurt won’t come back unless he’s in handcuffs. So, I’m here to persuade him.”

“What makes you think he’ll listen to you?”

She leant toward me, hands on knees, “I persuaded you to find him.”

“Touché. But you didn’t hire me to be your bodyguard. Close personal protection isn’t a service I offer. So, I go alone from here. Book yourself into a hotel, see what’s on at the Opera House. We’ll meet-up after I find him.”

Checkmate, I thought. But she wasn’t paying attention. She was tapping and scrolling on her computer tablet. Then she turned the screen towards me, “Is that enough to change your mind?”

She had the transfer screen for her bank account displayed. There was a sum listed, and under it was my account number at the credit union in East Longmeadow. I thought I had her ensnared, but this was a game changer. It was a lot of money.

“It’ll certainly buy a new set of snow tyres for the Jeep.”

She offered me a bemused smile, “I’m starting to get used to your dry sense of humour.”

I didn’t consider this scenario in my planning. I realised that she was watching me consider the new terms and conditions. I couldn’t disguise the fact that I was wavering on accepting.

She raised her eyebrows, “Do I transfer the cash, or book myself into a Harbour-side hotel?”

Hell! I was supposed to be the one doing the ambushing.

Her finger hovered over the transfer button, “Well? Do we have a deal or not?”

Ten



The connecting flight to Adelaide was announced. I lifted my glass and threw back the Cuban rum. “Okay, but I run the operation. You’re coming along to convince Kurt in case he throws a tantrum.”

Again, she wasn’t listening. She was gathering-up her shopping. I could only be angry with myself. I had succumbed. I held my glass up to the light and watched film of the remaining liquid slowly recede down the sides. Faye was right, it was the smoothest liquor I’d ever had. I could easily develop a taste for it.

* * *

Once in the taxi I instructed the driver to take us to the Hilton Hotel on Adelaide’s Victoria Square. It was in the centre of the city, well situated for me to organise for our expedition to the outback. Although I had seen Sydney Airport, this was my first encounter with the Australian countryside. I scanned the houses and streets as the taxi wove its way through the traffic east to the city centre. It was reminiscent of southern California—single storey buildings, and neat streetscapes with eucalyptus trees. The weather was mild compared to New England and the buildings reflected this. It appeared that the harsh sun of summer was more of a problem than the winter where because never reaches freezing. I found the sights pleasing.

My eyes were getting heavy and my head bumped the taxi’s side window when I momentarily nodded off. I was exhausted. I wanted to sleep.

At the reception counter I fought to keep my eyes open while Yvette asked if they had a city view room with a king-size bed on one of the upper floors. I just wanted a room, but because she was paying, I thought I’d test her goodwill. I leaned on the counter and said, “Same for me.” Without a moment’s hesitation, she swiped her credit card through the e-terminal and entered her PIN.

At the door to my room I bade her good night. Suppressing a yawn, I said, “See you in the morning. We can discuss our plans at breakfast. Does seven a.m. suit?”

“But it’s only four in the afternoon. You’re going to sleep now?”

“I’ve had it. Need my beauty rest. Seven okay?”

“Sure, but you’ll miss out on the fun tonight.”

“I’m off duty. No close personal protection tonight. If you go out, you’re on your own.”

“After what I paid you, I’d expect your services 24/7.”

I inserted the plastic swipe card into the locking mechanism and heard the bolt retract. As I pushed the door open I glanced left at her doing the same. It was difficult to focus, but I could make out Yvette standing there in her black leather skirt. I wondered what Kurt was thinking when he left her. I thought Yvette could send a rush of desire through most men. I was sure the waters of Kurt’s mind were dark, shadowy. How could he not see what he had in her? I wondered what I’d think when I met him. And I *was* going to meet him. I was determined to find out what this was about; what kind of man walks out on a life like that.

I didn’t have the energy to study the photographic notes I made earlier, but I was determined to stay awake long enough to send Sophie an email asking her to run a few background checks for me.

Eleven



I was surprised to see she was at breakfast before me. Yvette Kerslake was in her gym attire, obviously having just finished a workout. I could never bring myself to go to a gym—the full-length mirrors, rows of machines, funky music, and mineral water in colours that matched whatever Lycra you were wearing. I always thought they were places that one went to be seen rather than to get in shape.

Guests were moving to-and-fro and a few were milling around the buffet, but she was at a table off to the side with her back against the wall, giving the table visual command of the room. It gave me a grin. The last thing a PI wants is to be noticed, and she was true to her word—she was trying to blend in.

I had a plan for the expedition, so when we finished exchanging niceties, I briefed her. “I’ll hire a vehicle and meet you back here, then we head north.”

After breakfast, Yvette wandered off to pack and I began phoning places to rent a four-wheel drive vehicle. They all had reasonable rates, but one offered to drop it off within the hour, so I went with them.

As I completed the paperwork and loaded my duffle into the Holden, I thought about Faye. Occasionally, you meet someone and wonder what it would be like to be with them. When you’re in a relationship you have a built-in moral shield that forces you *not* to wonder—you’re in a relationship, so it wouldn’t be right. But when you’re single, when you meet people, you view them with a different eye. I viewed Faye like that. Although I wondered, she made it clear she wasn’t interested—‘I need a practical guy who can fix things. . .’ Even though she was hard to put out of my mind, I probably needed to resign myself to the fact that it would always be an unsatisfied itch. *Perhaps if I thought about her as one of those infatuations one has while on vacation, the ache would go?*

My smartphone vibrated. Sophie’s email had arrived with the details I requested.

* * *

I eased the Holden through the traffic. I shifted through the gears as we left the last set of traffic lights on the main arterial road out of Adelaide. We were heading north to a place called Copley, five kilometres north of Leigh Creek; or about eight hours' drive.

It was a simple route; I needed to drive north to a place called Port Augusta. From there, it was slightly east, then north again to our destination.

Although it was late October and New England was entering the autumn equinox, it was spring in Australia. It was like being given a second chance at something—still air, green countryside, clear blue skies, and warmth. As we travelled along the Princes Highway toward Port Augusta, I looked at everything—the vehicles on the roads, the buildings, and the landscape. It was manifestly different to driving along the Mass Pike. It was flat with wheat and other cereal crops growing on immense acreages. There weren't the forests that were common in New England. The only trees were gums—eucalypts—and other native species. I had seen them in the glossy picture books at Sydney Airport, but couldn't recall their names. They grew in small stands here-and-there off the side of the highway, or in the distance around homesteads.

I placed the Holden in cruise control and steadied myself for the journey by suggesting to Yvette that we listen to some music. She busied herself with the vehicle's FM radio, tuning this station and then that, until she located a station playing classical melodies. But once we passed Port Wakefield the reception faded quickly and we lost the music to atmospheric static. That was a relief because I wasn't a fan of classical music. To me there are two types of musicians: those who played jazz and those that wish they could.

There were a few AM stations, but Yvette discounted them and opted for what she had on her smartphone. She had an eclectic collection and having listened to the aria from Verdi's *A Masked Ball* about unrequited love, I scrolled through her collection leaving a few hippy rock operas behind and switched to Peter Sarstedt's song; *Where do you Go to (My Lovely)*. The open vastness of the landscape made the vehicle's speed seem slow. The hum of the engine made me drift into a trance, but I came back when I heard the words, ' . . .shake off their lowly born tags. . .'. How wrong I was about Kurt providing the income for her lifestyle.

Sophie's email briefed me on the background and credit checks she ran. Yvette was 'old money' *...an only child of parents who owned a house in Boston's Beacon Hill neighbourhood—one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Boston. Her father is a*

partner in a law firm that has offices in Boston, New York and Washington. The firm's clients were banks and investment houses until the financial crisis of 2008 when the firm did an almost overnight shift in its speciality to IP—intellectual property. The firm now represents software giants in the IT industry.

Sophie's briefing said that Yvette was wealthy in her own right and didn't need Kurt's income. In fact, a credit check showed that although Kurt's sales generated a generous salary, it faded in comparison to Yvette's investments.

She had graduated with a BA in art history from Smith College, majoring in art and artefacts of American Indians. She went on to take her masters in art installations—displays and displaying artworks—from Harvard. If that wasn't enough, she's a member of DAR—Daughters of the American Revolution—an exclusive organisation whose members can prove direct ancestral descent from someone who aided American independence in 1776. With that sort of background, no wonder she was appointed curator of the American Indian Collection.

Sarstedt's words ' . . .They say that when you get married it'll be to a millionaire. . . ', couldn't be further from the truth. I wondered why she married him. *What was it that she saw in him, why didn't he see the opportunity he had in her, and her unblinking commitment to him?*

Yvette reached across the dash and changed the song to some upbeat Abba tune.

I thought that was a good time to raise the issue. "So, what have you been reading?" I said, trying to get inside her head. As an investigator, I found a person's bookshelf as telling as any other question. If people didn't have books in their house, that told a story. If they did and there were only a few, that too told a story. And, when I read the titles, these reveal some insights into their psyche.

"Art history mostly." She slanted her head to regard me with suspicion.

I tried to manoeuvre the conversation to reveal more. "I thought you'd be the type to read stuff like *The Greening of America*; *Atlas Shrugged*; that kind of thing."

"I've read those. I'm interested in clever people's visions and thinking about how the world they hoped for might come about."

I regarded lefties with some reservation because I thought they spent a lot of time thinking about the world, but not doing anything about it. "Does Kurt read much?"

“What are you getting at?” I could feel her bristle as if there was static electricity in the air.

“How did he come up with those ideas? They’re not grounded in reality. Is this some publicity stunt to drive up his sales? I’ll be honest with you; I ran a credit check.”

I was sure there were flashes of high voltage sparking inside her head, “My Trust looks after me financially so I can concentrate on my promotion of art and my patronage of the fine arts. I look after Kurt so he can paint. Unfortunately, discrimination impacted on his identity in a big way. His art was a way of coping with it, and exposing it, but he succumbed to drink. After a while *it* consumed *him*. Our relationship slowly sank into days where we had long sulking moods. He became depressed. It wasn’t pleasant. Depression isn’t kind. I worked hard to shield him from the public backlash of his drinking, but in recent times, his drinking got out of hand.”

“And now he’s taking hallucinogenic drugs. Is that the source of his strange ideas?”

Yvette turned away. She spoke to me but looked at the countryside. “I wanted a child. We tried. He couldn’t deliver.” She bowed her head, “Depression has left him incapable of—”

I flinched. “Sorry.”

“For what? Things happen in life.”

I wasn’t game to tell her my joke about how I felt better once I gave up on hope, so I said, “We still need to find a way through the darkness.”

She didn’t comment. Just stared out the window.

As the countryside sped past at 110 kilometres an hour, in a firm voice I said, “I’ll find him.”

Twelve



At a small town called Crystal Brook I stopped at a petrol station for fuel. An interesting town, the sign said it was named after a natural spring that fed the nearby creek. Perhaps it was given the name *Brook* instead of *Creek* by some nostalgic English pioneer.

“Goin’ to be a big rain,” came the voice of a mechanic who passed on his way to the garage. His overalls were embroidered with a logo and name of some farm maintenance business. He was a young man, probably in his twenties but looking as if he’d been working for thirty years. He had deep creases in his face that the sun had etched-in and accumulated grease. I smiled, “Looks clear to me,” and glanced to the sky.

He pointed northwest. “For now, but you see those clouds, they’re goin’ to bring a drenching. Where you headed?”

“A small town five kilometres north of Leigh Creek; Copley.”

“Ain’t likely you’ll make it. The radio news is saying that roads to the north are going to be washed out. Which way you thinkin’ of going?”

“Port Augusta, then to Leigh Creek.”

“If you are keen to get there, I’d be going to Laura, then I’d follow the Tarcowie Road to Orroroo. If you make it that far, then head north to Hawker. Doubt you’ll get there though—that’s where the worst of it will be. Lots of creeks. What are ya drivin’?”

“That Holden,” I said, indicating the rental next to the petrol pump, Yvette in the front passenger’s seat.

“Hmm, lacks what you need to operate in the bush.”

I wondered if he was talking about the vehicle or Yvette.

“I can tell you’re a tourist; Canada?”

“The States. Massachusetts. Ever been there?”

“Nope. Furthest I’ve been being Melbourne. Didn’t like it there. Anyway, be careful crossing creeks.” He looked at me seriously. “If the water comes up too high, it’ll lift the

vehicle, you'll float, be swept away with the rest of the debris. It's the speed of the water, the rocks, tree stumps that will rip you apart. Has no mercy. You can only pray that they'll find what's left of you. . .” He let the end of his warning hang.

I could see why he looked older than his twenty-odd years of life. People out here obviously grow up fast; life was sombre, unforgiving.

“Thanks mate,” I said, hoping my voice carried a ring that suggested I was less untested than I was. But his advice resonated with me about not being naïve; this was a deadly place where nature is rarely in a mood to offer bargains.

“Cheers,” he said and went into the mechanic's bay to work on a truck.

I returned to the vehicle and told Yvette there was a change of plans and summarised the advice about the weather. I reprogrammed the GPS and we were off.

* * *

He was right. Soon after passing through Laura we saw the clouds move in—dark, threatening. Rain started to hit the windshield, so I had to increase the speed of the wipers as we proceeded along the narrow road. Minutes later the sky opened and the rain became so heavy I had to slow to a crawl to see the road. What looked like rolling fields now looked like giant catchments for storm water, each fold in the hilly landscape was channelling the rain into a series of creeks that flowed into each other until they ended up in a larger creek.

I could now see what the mechanic warned me about. The main creek ran alongside the road and crisscrossed it at various points, but unlike where I come from, there were no bridges—only fords. The crossings were marked with water level markers that showed how high the water was in relation to the lowest part of the ford—the top of the markers said two metres. *That's six-and-a-half feet!*

I glanced at Yvette—she was silent. Her hands were gripping the shoulder restraint of the seatbelt as she leant forward trying to see the road ahead. But when we approached the first creek crossing, I stopped at the top of the slope and looked at the water level marker. It said 200, meaning 0.2 of a metre, or about eight inches. I opened the door and leant out to look at the clearance of the vehicle and the centre of the wheel hubs.

With a quaking voice, Yvette exclaimed, “What are you doing?”

“Checking to see if we've got the clearance to cross.”

Her face was like a caricature of a cat being tortured by the sight of a bathtub, “What are you talking about!”

“Look, if the water level is lower than the bottom of the doors, I figure the weight of the vehicle will keep traction and we’ll be able to cross.”

With a pained stare, she said, “You’re going to drive us through *that*?”

“Hey, it’s only if the vehicle becomes buoyant that we’ll have a problem. You can panic then.”

I could see that wasn’t the right advice to give. ‘Trust me’ would have been equally unhelpful, so I engaged the four-wheel drive hubs and eased the vehicle into the torrent, letting the idling revs take us across.

Yvette’s eyes were clinched shut.

As we started to climb the other side, the sound of the water splashing under the vehicle stopped, and the rain hitting the roof was the only sound. She opened her eyes and apologised for her panic attack.

“No worries,” I said in my best imitation of an Aussie accent.

She smiled. “I suppose that won’t be the end of it?”

“Best I can gauge, we’ve another 30 or 40 kilometres to Orroroo. I suspect there’ll be a few more creeks.”

“More!?”

“Perhaps. Maybe three or four.”

We were moving again, but at a slower speed because the rain had been heavy. Then, I noticed, “Hey, look, the rain’s easing.”

She looked around as if to say, ‘Oh sure!’ But it was and I picked up speed, hoping to get to Orroroo as soon as we could. With each creek crossing I checked the levels and reasoned out loud so she could understand what I was doing. It seemed to give her confidence that what I was doing was safe. Most crossings were between 0.2 and 0.3 metres (8 to 12 inches). I reminded her that under the fast-flowing dark creek water was a road.

She said, “Oh yeah, I thought it was like ponds back home—goeey mud that sucks you down.”

About five kilometres from Orroroo my GPS advised that we were facing the last of the creeks. My poise was peaking having had the sage advice from the young man at the petrol station, so I said to Yvette, “Hey, you have a go—you tell me about the one coming up.”

With her nerves settling a bit and composure returning to her voice, she said, “Okay.” But a minute after we rounded the turn and started down our approach slope I realised this creek was different; it was about three times wider; the water was rougher, and there was a large amount of debris floating in the current. The fact that we hadn’t seen any vehicles coming toward us the whole way suddenly made sense. It was an omen.

Yvette was leaning forward again, looking like a look-out in an old sailing ship’s crow’s nest. She eyed the water level and said, “Zero point three metres,” but it was the look on her face that confirmed my reservations. She, like me, must have felt this crossing was hiding something.

“Okay,” I said, “we cross this one and we’ll stop at Orroroo for the night.”

She gave me a hesitating nod, “Just get it over with. I need a drink.”

I gave the accelerator pedal a nudge and heard the engine respond. Everything was fine until we were about mid-way into the creek when the front of the vehicle suddenly dipped as if we were falling into a ravine. There was no backing up—we were at the point of no return. So, I revved the engine and immediately heard the water being hosed all over the engine. I could imagine the water being sucked into the air intake. It was only a matter of seconds before the engine would stall.

Fast or slow, it didn’t seem to matter how many revs I gave the engine because Yvette was screaming that water was coming in under the doors. As the back end of the vehicle dropped to match the front I saw the water running over the hood. I knew we were on borrowed time. When that moment came, I hoped I could get Yvette out of the vehicle. If I was a Catholic, I would have blessed myself.

Yvette was in her now customary position—eyes clinched, grasping the shoulder strap, but this time she had her feet on the seat to avoid the water that was pouring in. I pressed the accelerator to the floor to get as much momentum as I could before the engine died.

Then, as if we were on a sideshow fair ride, the rear end of the Holden spun around. Now the front-end was facing upstream. The engine was revving but there we were floating like a boat and heading downstream, sinking as we went.

The smell of the muddy water filled my nostrils and the noise inside the vehicle sounded as if we were inside a washing machine. I was concentrating so hard on what my next move might be to worry about dying—all I could think of was getting Yvette to safe ground.

As I scanned the Orroroo side of the bank for possible places to make our break from the vehicle, the wheels caught and we were thrown back into our seats. I turned the wheel hard toward the upward slope and a second later we were out of the water.

I eased off the accelerator as we scaled the bank. I stopped at the top and opened my door so the water could drain out.

Yvette opened her eyes. The look of relief was on her face, but there was a bit of tension still in her voice, “Are we still alive?”

“How are you?”

“Like I walked into a spinning propeller.”

Even though I felt much the same, all I could do was flash a feeble grin.

The rain had almost stopped. I pulled the Holden forward and off the side of the road just beyond the embankment. “If you open your door you can put your feet on the floor.”

I kept the engine running to dry out the engine compartment and opened the back doors to survey our gear in the cargo area. My canvas duffle was good. Her bags were on top, so they were dry too.

I looked back at the flowing creek which seemed to have peaked and saw an entire gum tree thundering through the spot where we were less than a minute ago. As an atheist, I could see how people turned to prayer. But, as comforting as that might have been, to this non-believer my idea of comfort was to join Yvette for a drink.

Thirteen



Having drained the remainder of the water from the vehicle, leaving only a thin muddy coating that marked the water level, I took the Holden back onto the paved road and toward the township of Orroroo. But, a few hundred yards ahead was a road block. It was staffed by a half dozen men and women dressed in orange uniforms, black paratrooper-style boots, and safety helmets. Their uniform shoulder patch stating ‘State Emergency Services.’

One of the men, with stars on his epaulettes, waved us over. I wasn’t sure what rank he was but I presumed stars meant he was the officer-in-charge. A patch over his right breast pocket said, ‘Rescue.’ From the look on his face, I knew I was in trouble.

“You okay?” he asked but didn’t wait for an answer. “Are you travelling alone or are you with other vehicles?”

I could hear the crackle of his handheld transceiver with someone at the other end saying, ‘Standing by.’

“We’re fine. We’re travelling alone; no one else.”

He didn’t respond, just pressed the push-to-talk button on the side of his radio and said, “No other vehicles.”

“Roger. Out,” came the radio voice.

He said, “We tried to block the other end before the storm hit but you must have been on the road by then. You should have waited out the squall.” His face was stern.

I nodded, feeling as if I’d been addressed by a Sudanese border guard.

“Not sure how you got across that creek. The middle of the road was washed out when the storm hit.” He looked at the interior of the cab. “I see you took on some water. You could have drowned. I should report you,” and took out a notepad and pencil from his breast pocket.

I could feel Yvette’s fingers dig into my leg. She smiled at the rescuer. “My husband was foolish; I can’t believe he did that. It’s *so* out of character. He’s always very careful.

Please, I can assure you that he won't do that again—ever!" She looked at me with a severe stare. "Will you?" And poked me.

I played along. "Sorry honey, that was pretty stupid." I gave him a brisk nod, "My apologies officer, we're tourists. Learned an important lesson back there." *But the lesson I learned, I thought, is how she covers things up that are potentially embarrassing.*

He made a sucking sound with his teeth, put away the notepad, waved us on. But before I could get into gear he said, "Just check the vehicle for snakes, they get caught up in the underbody when they get washed downstream."

With the eyes of the other rescuers watching us pass, I thought, *If this was Mexico, I'm sure he would've addressed me as 'Gringo.'* But the thought of a snake hiding in some dark corner under the Holden scared me more than the thought of that tree smashing into us. *Creepy!* I wanted to say, 'Hey Yvette, do me a favour, crawl under the vehicle, see if there're any snakes,' but I couldn't, so I questioned her—"Your husband?"

* * *

Luck was finally on our side. As we entered Orroroo there was a sign for a bed-and-breakfast. I turned the Holden into the driveway of the old stone house and parked under a carport that had a sign indicating 'Guests.' I left the windows of the vehicle ajar to help air the dampness. I prodded the gap with my finger, figuring that if I couldn't get my finger through, a snake couldn't get in either. I wasn't sure if that was the case, but my logic seemed sound.

We checked in, deciding to inspect the underbody in the morning. Now all I wanted to was to shower, put on some dry socks, and have a drink, or two.

A widow in her late sixties—Mrs Walkley—owned the property and had converted it to a B&B when her husband died. It was an impressive place filled with well-preserved pieces of English antique furniture. I assumed they had been in the family for a few generations. Looking around brought back a thought of Raymond Chandler's novel—*The Big Sleep*—where the action takes place in a place called *casa de oro*, or in English, golden house. Oro wasn't quite Orroroo, but it had a similar ring, and this house was golden in its appeal to a survivor of the misery a few kilometres back.

When we explained that we had a difficult time crossing the creek, she said, "Well you're none the worse for wear, but it does look like you need something to eat." She then

offered us roast lamb and vegetables that she had left over from her meal, which we eagerly accepted. I bought a bottle of claret from a rack of wines she had on offer.

The art on the walls took Yvette's fancy and she chatted with the host late into the night about their origins and the various artists, especially the Aboriginals' dot paintings. These First Australians had names that were as unpronounceable as some of the Polish names in the town over from where I lived—Chicopee. I must admit; these artists' works were mesmerising. They reflected the ancientness of the land we were traversing. I had a few drinks and fatigue began to take hold. I said good night to the two women and fell into bed.

* * *

The morning was glorious—blazing sun, a calm breeze, and abounding birdlife. It was as bright as the Aboriginal paintings on Mrs Walkley's walls. I always knew that the world's ornithologists adored Australia as a destination for bird watching, and sitting in the garden that she created, I was treated to some of what I thought were the most spectacularly beautiful birds I'd ever seen. I had no idea what types they were, but the colours were like something from a Disney film—bright greens, blues, and reds. Mrs Walkley, a nicely-presented woman with an air of grace and serenity, pointed out what she called *galahs* in a small gum tree that was growing outside the back door—they were large pink and grey birds that hung from a branch and made a dreadful screeching sound before the flock flew off.

Her garden was a strange combination of order where there were clearly defined plantings of rosemary bushes and other herbs, interspersed with what looked like self-sown vegetables that had germinated from compost she had spread. Under the overhead vines were large terracotta pots filled to overflowing with more herbs and flowers. It was like a magic garden with her wooden dining table amidst the overhanging branches, garden greenery, and her six bantam chickens that roamed free.

Mrs Walkley brought out a pot of brewed coffee and some fresh baked bread. We chatted about family. She said she had a son who was a stockbroker in Sydney, and her daughter was a nurse with some international aid organisation, working in Jordan.

When Yvette joined me in the garden, she looked as good as she did at the Hilton. I, on the other hand, felt like a piece of driftwood that needed oil rubbed into it. All I could do to feel better was to pour another cup.

Yvette sat across from me as I sipped my coffee. I watched her hands lift her cup. Then it occurred to me that she wasn't *alluring* at all; she was an *illusion*. And she was good at projecting whatever image she wanted.

"You have such an attractive garden," Yvette complimented Mrs Walkley.

"Thank you. Do you have green fingers?"

"No, the only plants I buy are cut flowers because they are supposed to die."

I couldn't imagine Yvette kneeling in her garden, weeding.

I looked at the water in the bird bath that was filled by the storm. It was tranquil. I asked, "Is there a garage in town where I can get the undercarriage checked for damage before heading north?" I didn't say, '*And snakes. . .*'

"Oh sure, call into Gibb's, he's on Second Street, near the road to Jamestown. Can't miss it."

I helped do the dishes as Yvette finished her chat about the Pro Hart painting she saw in the hallway, and Mrs Walkley made us a few sandwiches out of the remainder of the bread.

* * *

"I was relieved to hear there was no damage to the car," said Yvette as we headed toward Hawker, the last town before Leigh Creek and Copley. After Leigh Creek, there was nothing much but a small town called Marree 120 kilometres further north. I read that Marree consisted of a pub with motel facilities, a few houses, and *the last* petrol station. It once serviced a major rail head where cattle and sheep were transported to markets in Port Augusta and Adelaide, but not anymore. The dirt road between the two was called the Oodnadatta Track and it was for serious four-wheel drive vehicles, not rentals like ours.

"Yep, that's good news," I responded, thinking all along that it wasn't the damage I was concerned about, but the reptiles.

Looking around at the landscape I noticed that we were isolated—from horizon to horizon, whether looking north–south or east–west, there was no sign of human habitat. I couldn't imagine that anywhere could be more out-of-the-way than this, but from what I read, there was, and we were heading straight into it.

Yvette gave a satisfied sigh, “Mrs Walkley said there was a place called Parachilna not far from Leigh Creek. They served gourmet meals, and the accommodation sounded charming. It had all the creature comforts—and there’s an art gallery there too.”

I started to point out that we were behind schedule and that if I had embarked on this mission on my own, as was originally planned, I’d be there by now. As I went to speak these wise words, I felt tension build in my chest and caught myself in time. *It isn’t worth it, it’ll as it has so far—her in control*, I thought. Instead, I turned to her, took a breath and said, “So you’d like me to stop there?”

She nodded.

I gave her my best imitation of a smile, “So we will.”

Fourteen



It was interesting observing the new landscape—it was so different to New England. Although the storm had passed there were still pools of water on the sides of the road. I could see for kilometres, but the animals blended well with the surrounding countryside. The weather report I'd heard before we left Mrs Walkley's was for another storm in a day or so. I checked the rear-view mirror wondering if any clouds were in pursuit, but all I saw a speck on the horizon. It was a vehicle of some sort, but because it was so far away, I couldn't make out its details. It surprised me because we hadn't seen a car or truck for quite some time.

In what seemed less than a minute I looked in the mirror again and I could now see a car moving at an incredible speed up behind us. I thought it might be an emergency vehicle, but it wasn't. There were no flashing lights. Before I could turn the Holden toward the shoulder to let him pass, the car passed at what seemed to be double my speed. I looked at my speedometer. It read 100 kilometres per hour. So, he'd have to have been doing 150, or 160.

Yvette gave a startled cry and with amazed eyes she watched the car rocket down the road, still on the other side. It made no effort to change back into the correct lane.

“Why's he driving so fast?” She had bewilderment in her voice.

“He's not driving fast; he's flying at a very low altitude.”

She wasn't amused by my joke, even though she claimed to be getting used to my dry humour. She seemed distressed to see such reckless driving.

Within seconds the car had disappeared over a rise in the road. I subconsciously slowed to 90 as we both regained our composure. I went back to watching the road. Then, I noticed a lot of debris on the bitumen—it looked like seed pods that had been blown onto the road from the surrounding bushes. They made a popping sound when I drove over them. Then the 'pods' began bouncing off the windshield as more and more appeared across the roadway. I realised that they weren't seed pods at all, they were locusts. It was a swarm of

grasshoppers darting across our path. They grew so dense I was forced to slow as they enveloped the four-wheel drive. They blanketed the road and darkened the sky. They seemed to be moving from west to east, but because they were so thick, I couldn't make out how big the swarm was, or how long it would take to pass through. The bugs' impact made a drumming sound on the body of the vehicle.

"This is unbelievable!" Yvette whispered. She seemed stunned. "They look like little arrows flying through the air." Her face was a glassy stare.

As suddenly as the swarm appeared, it vanished. There were bug corpses all over the car. I could smell the pungent odour of cooked locust that had been diced when they passed through the fine metal mesh that formed the vehicle's radiator webbing. I switched off the ventilation fan and turned on the windshield wipers on to scrape away their remains.

As the bug guts cleared, I saw skid marks on the road—wide black marks that brought a sense of dread. I wondered what had caused the tyre marks. Then I saw the low flying car. It was upside-down off to the left. The wheels were still spinning. There was smoke lingering in the air from the melted tyre rubber.

I pulled the Holden over, parking just short of where the car left the bitumen. I stepped from the vehicle, looked around and listened. Nothing but silence—eerie silence.

Fifteen



Immediate thought was that he's lucky we were behind him. But as soon as that thought passed, I realised he was neither lucky nor alive. He was in his late teens, still strapped into his seat, upside-down, arms dangle in an unnatural state. Protruding through the windshield and embedded in his chest was a fencing dropper used to support the sagging middle of a long-gone barbed-wire barrier. It must have become airborne when he left the road, flew like a spear. I reached through the smashed driver's side window and felt his wrist for a pulse. There was none. His limp arm was warm and supple. It was hard to think he was full of life only seconds ago.

Having investigated a wrecking yard full of car accidents for insurance companies, I realised the police would want to take photos and measurements. Skid marks and tyre tracks are important evidence. I didn't want to disturb what might be a crime scene.

"See if your smartphone works," I said to Yvette as I surveyed the damage.

She stepped her way through the low shaggy grass that dotted the road side. "Is he dead?"

"There's a hole in his chest with a piece of steel sticking in it. I suspect it caused him to stop breathing." I bit my tongue, realising my dark humour may be inappropriate. "It's not a pretty sight."

"Western thought denies death. But the search for Truth invites us to understand it. American Indian thought does just that; a person's spirit never dies."

Her wisdom sounded like mysticism to me. I was more practically focused, "Any phone reception?"

She held her phone in one hand and raised it over her head attempting to get better reception. She looked at the screen and scowled, "None at all."

"Okay, we're out of range." I held her by her shoulders. "Can you cope? I need you to think clearly and go for help."

She rolled her eyes, “Of course I can.”

“Really?”

She looked at me with a quizzical stare. “American Indians view death as not an end to life, but the beginning of a deeper spiritual existence. The spirit moves through the sky, west, towards the setting sun—”

I cut her lecture short, “Can you drive back to Orroroo and let the authorities there know? I’ll stay with him in case another vehicle comes by.” I took Yvette’s smartphone and snapped a photo of the car, a close-up of the license plate, and finally a close-up of the young man inside. *That one will grab their attention*, I thought.

The dead teenager’s eyes were black and as chilling as a Scottish lake. There was a smell of pot in the car. Strong. I suspected he had had more than a few puffs. It’s been decriminalised in places, but my view was that it was a weed that grew with its roots in hell. I’ve investigated a lot car accidents in which I could trace the cause back to people driving under the influence of either booze or pot. This was another.

It’s a shock for parents when they’re told their child has died, but it’s an experience of nightmarish proportions when they must ID the body. I’m sure the image of their son’s face—that blank expression, those hollow eyes—will haunt them every night to come.

Yvette drove away as the wheels stopped spinning and I was left with the ghost of a man whose would never see what life had to offer. The car was too damaged for me to get him out so I sat on the ground and eyed the road north and south. There wasn’t anything moving in either direction.

Australia was everything I imagined—untouched, unspoiled, majestic. But sitting on the bare ground I realised it was also unforgiving.

I looked at the sky. Its colours were changing as the winds tried to dissipate what was left of the storm. If I were a character in a Raymond Chandler story, I suppose I’d have absently lit a cigarette, or drunk from a bottle of whiskey. But I couldn’t think of anything worse than doing either, so I sat, looked up. I was left with my thoughts about a man who never saw his end coming.

The first hour passed slowly. There was no sign of movement on the road, so my attention started to slip, time seemed to dilate, I could feel myself dozing off. As a cloud came over and the temperature dropped, I didn’t fight it. If I was conducting surveillance I

would've had a coffee—a PI can't afford to take his eyes off the target. There have been instances where investigators have closed their eyes, just for a few minutes, and sent the whole operation down the drain. But this surveillance was different. There wasn't any chance either the man or any car going past would escape my attention, even if I slept. So, in the cool air I did just that.

* * *

When I woke, it wasn't with a start. I sat up and looked around. I was a bit disoriented at first but then the events came back. The silence was broken only by the sound of a light breeze blowing in the distance. Shadows were getting long. It was like the sound of wind rushing through a canyon, but there was no canyon, just open space. The state of Montana is called 'Big Sky Country.' The Flinders Ranges had to be Australia's Big Sky Country.

I looked at my watch, three hours had passed. The dead man was still there except he was now covered with flies. They filled the car. I didn't think anything could make a worse sight than him hanging upside down, but there it was—him covered with maggot-laying insects. I shook his arm. The flies buzzed, circled, then landed on him again. The last time I touched him he was warm, limber. Now he was cold, stiff.

I heard cars approaching. It was coming from the Orroroo road. As they drew near, I saw the lead vehicle had police markings—it looked like a four-wheel drive with flashing lights and several antennae. Behind it was Yvette in the Holden. I stood and waited their arrival. To my surprise, when the police patrol pulled up, the driver sat in the cab looking at me. He then got out, slowly, and walked to the rear. He pulled a long handled shovel off the roof rack and walked toward me. I was about to greet him when he said, "If you move, you're dead."

Shit, I thought. I read about mass murders roaming the Australian outback, but wasn't told that the cops were homicidal too!

I did as I was told. I didn't like the idea of being planted amongst the salt bush, so I began thinking of an escape plan.

I saw Yvette walking up behind him, she froze with her hands over her mouth. There was a look of panic in her eyes.

The cop bent over, using the shovel to reach ahead. I watched as the head of the shovel came closer and closer, but not towards me; to my right. I turned, followed its path until I

saw what he was doing. The uniformed officer slid the shovel under the body of dark tan coloured snake and lifted it. With a quick flick, he catapulted it through the air and into the distant scrub. He gave me a broad smile, “I’m Detective Sergeant Lloyd Miller—call me Lloyd.” His short red hair showed through his country-style police cap. He had thick eyebrows and pale skin that looked as though it would burn easily under the Australian sun.

I felt the blood drain from my head and I could see my peripheral vision fade. Then I couldn’t see anything.

* * *

I was lying on my side with my left arm under my head and my right extended, right knee bent in the recovery position used by first-aiders. I could hear Lloyd Miller on the two-way radio in the distance, but couldn’t make out what was being said.

Yvette was sitting on the ground in front of me saying, “You were supposed to be protecting *me*. Now I’m here scaring away snakes for *you*.”

Perhaps it was her attempt at humour—I couldn’t tell.

I rubbed my forehead, “Yvette, even snakes are afraid of snakes.”

I could hear footsteps.

“You okay, mate?” asked the Detective Sergeant.

I sat up and greeted him, thanking him for saving me.

“No worries, mate. It was a brown snake. Common in the Ranges, its venom is extremely potent. Looks like it was sleeping next to you trying to keep warm.”

“It was sleeping next to me?” I could feel the blood draining away again.

“Happens sometimes. They seem to be able to sense warmth, seek it out. If it bit you, could have been fatal. Their poison attacks the nervous system and kidneys. Also, causes blood clotting problems. They’re a nasty bag of misery.” He screwed up his nose.

I had to stop thinking about it—just the image of it was paralysing. To change the subject, I asked, “Ambulance?”

“Yep, coming from Orroroo. Should be here soon with the State Emergency Service to cut him free. The paramedics will pronounce death even though we know he is. I radioed the details to my station, they’ll organise notification of next of kin. The kid’s not local. He’s

from Port Augusta; he should have known better.” He paused. “Yvette told me you’re a PI. Seen a lot of traffic accidents, hey?”

“Yeah, but after the event. Not while the bodies were still inside.”

“Bad luck with this one. Yvette indicated he was speeding when he hit the locust swarm.”

“Speeding! If he was going any faster he’d have travelled back in time. And when you check the body, I think you’ll find weed was involved.”

Lloyd nodded. “There isn’t anything you can do here. You can go, but I still need statements from the two of you for my report to the coroner. Yvette told me you’re stopping at Parachilna for a meal. How about I see you there so I can do the write-up?” He started to turn, then added, “When Yvette showed up at the police station she wasn’t frightened. Most people shake like a tuna on the deck of a boat. I suggest you stay the night at the Prairie Hotel, recover from this. She could have a delayed reaction.” He tilted his head toward the wreck. “Keep your eye on her.”

“I understand,” I said, “but she’s pretty tough—not the type of girl who wants to swim with dolphins.”

“What?”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry, we’ll get rooms for tonight. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

He paused, looking a bit confused, then looked directly at me with the eyes of an interrogator. “There’s no law against you operating here under your American PI licence, but usual practice is that you check in with us before you go off making your *inquiries*. Mind if I see your license?”

It wasn’t a request; it was a demand. I got out my photo license and badge. He ran his index finger across the words ‘Private Investigator’ on my nickel-plated shield, then looked up. “What you’re doing this far from home?”

I got the impression he already knew from his conversation with Yvette. I was a long way from my jurisdiction and needed to make friends, not antagonise people, especially the local law. “Her husband’s gone missing. Nothing suspicious—nothing the law needs to be concerned about.” I hesitated, thinking about how much to reveal. “Matrimonial stuff,” I added, and winked, thinking that would convey whatever he wanted to read into it. “I located him around the Arkaroola area. I’m taking Yvette to bring him home.”

He regarded me like a collector examining a rare coin. “What’s his name?”

“Kurt Kerslake. He’s an artist. A painter. A Native American. You know, an Indian.”

“Kurt Kerslake? Doesn’t ring any bells. There’s lots of foreign tourists up here. The Flinders Ranges is a big attraction. If he entered the country legally, then he’s free to do what he wants within the limits of his visa.” His voice trailed off only to peak again. “Any outstanding warrants on him?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I think he’s involved with some Aboriginal group. I saw a few photos posted on a social media page. If I show you the photo perhaps you can give me a clue as to who the people are.”

I retrieved my file on Kurt and thumbed through the dossier. I produced the photo of Kurt standing in front of the SUV, and waited.

His posture stiffened. “Oh, you’ve got an unpredictable creature there. Careful it doesn’t turn on you.”

“What do you mean?”

“These people are involved in a brand of Indigenous politics that—” he seemed to be searching for a diplomatic way to put it, “—isn’t in keeping with the wider Aboriginal community’s thinking. Let’s just say this group has funny ideas.”

“I suspected that much. Some American Indians don’t agree with government policies. They can be very vocal. Know where I could start looking for him? There’s a lot of nothing out there.”

He chuckled. “A lot of nothing? You haven’t seen half of it.” He pointed north to the end of the mountain range that vanished into the horizon. “Wait till you get into some of those gorges and creeks. Let’s talk more when I see you tonight.”

* * *

I wasn’t keen to stay knowing the SES were on their way. I wasn’t interested in seeing that officer with the stars on his epaulettes again. We drove away, plunging deeper into the centre of Australia, resuming our trip that had now been delayed by more bad luck and misfortune. I looked in the rear-view mirror to see the detective snapping photographs of the car and the tyre marks. A moment later I could see the lights of the ambulance that was inbound to the accident site. Light clouds diffused the sunlight. The effect was an orange hue that glowed

with the feel of a slow combustion stove; an extraordinary sight, but one that occurred every day, yet was experienced by few. I felt lucky to be among the few. It was peaceful; a feeling I hadn't had in a while. *Go with the flow*, I thought. So, I decided to enjoy the countryside, which was like what I recalled around Nevada when I did a contract PI job in Las Vegas. I had to check on the *bona fides* for a client in Connecticut who was dating a new girl. Turned out she was a former Vegas stripper, but her previous employer referred to her as an exotic dancer.

Sixteen



The township of Parachilna appeared in the distance, slowly at first, then as we made our way along the road, it grew. It wasn't a big place, just a few houses and the Prairie Hotel—the town's centrepiece. There was a large communications tower on the south side of the township that hosted several telecommunications microwave dishes. The aerials underscored the remoteness of the location. It reminded me of a space probe that had landed on a distant planet—its antennae the only link to the Civilized World.

My initial impression was that this place was average—a disused railway siding, an old deserted school house with a few outbuildings, and a half dozen rundown, ill-maintained single-storey houses. Across from the rail line that ran from Port Augusta in the south, to the Leigh Creek coal mine further north, was the Prairie. It was a renovated old stone pub with a wide veranda that had chairs and tables. At the rear was a two-storey addition that housed the hotel rooms. Lemon-scented gum trees dotted the edge of the establishment and the grounds were sprinkled with sculptures made from old corrugated iron roof sheets and odd bits of farm machinery.

Noting these, I could see Yvette instantly warm to the place—if she was a cat, she would have purred.

Her world was different to mine. She had it all—money, a career, a ten-room house, domestic help, evenings at cultural events, and her name on the invitation list to all of Boston's arts openings. *Did I miss anything?* Ah, the lack of intimacy. Kurt was a drunk and seemed to be dabbling in home remedy psychopharmacology. I couldn't imagine what he might be like from his photo, but the vision of him taking her to dinner, giving her a slow massage and turning the lights down while he switched on some soft music wasn't gelling with him hanging out in Boston bars and talking off-beat politics.

Nevertheless, I guessed she'd faked bedroom excitement if he could go that far. She clearly viewed him as owing her a child. And she was going after him, again, to 'do his job.'

It was hard for me to understand, but I didn't need to. She was my client, so it didn't matter what she believed if what she was asking me to do was legal and somewhere this side of being ethical.

I parked the vehicle on the opposite side of the pub's forecourt. There was a large makeshift fireplace in front of the veranda where logs fashioned into stools were arranged haphazardly. It was obviously the place to congregate when night fell.

We walked into the lobby, checked in. Georgina Halliday, the owner, explained about the art gallery on the mezzanine floor, and the next I realised the two were wandering off, discussing some artist with a European sounding name. "I'm so surprised how his work has moved from realism to abstractionism," said Yvette.

Art and aesthetics was beyond me.

The sun looked like it was about to crash into the earth, so I brushed away a few flies, headed back to unpack and wash for dinner.

* * *

With a fresh shirt, I took-up a position at the short-curved bar and ordered a beer. With one elbow on the polished wood and my foot on the brass rail, I stared out the door into the evening sky.

The last rays gave the view a purple glow with orange highlights. Although a different season, and a different place, for an instant I felt as though I was sitting on the ridge back home looking at the autumn colours.

A police four-wheel drive pulled into the parking lot. Detective Sergeant Lloyd Miller unfolded his lanky body and he stepped out, placed his wide-brimmed hat on his head, adjusted his equipment belt. I waved to him through the open door to join me.

With good humour, he said, "Let's go outside so I can take your statement. Isn't a good look, a cop standing at a bar while on duty."

We walked to a table on the veranda, sat and he took out a pile of statement forms. With his left hand, he started to fill in the details when a French tourist approached. In broken English, he said, "I am collector of police patches. I will exchange French shoulder patch for yours."

The detective examined the patch as if examining a piece of evidence from a crime scene. “Looks good. Haven’t seen one of these.”

“So, yes, we will have deal?” asked the tourist.

“Let me see the hotel owner, she might have a pair of scissors, don’t want to ruin my shirt.”

Lloyd walked back into the pub and a minute later passed me on his way to one of the nearby houses, saying “Got to see Blanche, the wife of the handyman; she was once a seamstress.”

I picked-up one of the forms and began writing my statement. I had done this more times than I cared to remember. I completed mine and wrote one for Yvette to sign. Then I saw a man I thought might be Blanche’s husband approach the house. He was short, but well-built, wearing overalls and a dark blue singlet.

As the husband approached the door, it opened and out stepped Detective Miller, his shirt off and him buckling-up his trousers.

“This will be interesting,” I muttered under my breath.

The husband stopped in his tracks, his wife appeared at the door saying, “Pleased to help you out officer, stop by anytime.”

The Frenchman ran toward the group, waving his arms, ranting something that resembled English, but it came out mostly in excited French, “That not what it looked.”

Given the popular image for the French’s propensity for extramarital affairs, my immediate thought was, *I wonder if he’s been in a similar situation.*

I signed my statement and went looking for Yvette. The bar was full now. It was a sea of voices and people. I weaved my way through the crush. Yvette was talking to the head waiter at the entrance to the dining room. She was wearing her boots with a pair of blue-black jeans tucked into them. She had a silk jacket with an intricate pattern of black swirls on a dark orange background. Around her neck was a single strand of burnt-orange ceramic shapes.

“He has only one table left, over there by the window. We need to eat now because they’re expecting a movie crew to arrive later from shooting somewhere in some gorges.”

“Okay, but sign this.” I pushed the statement into her hand and gave her my pen. “It’s your statement for the police.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I’ve checked it. It’s fine.”

“Nothing about Kurt in this?”

“Nothing.”

With one hand on his hip and a swagger, the waiter showed us to our table.

“Thanks Francis, I’ll see to our guests,” came Lloyd Miller’s voice. The cop turned to us, “Sorry about that diversion, I’m a sucker for police memorabilia.”

“And Blanche’s husband?” I chuckled.

“Oh, that. My French friend worked some magic with his silver tongue. They’re all drinking rosé on the veranda. They’ll be singing soon...”

I handed him the two statements. “You’ll find these to be to your satisfaction.”

He thumbed through them. “I see you’ve written legal documents before. Many thanks, I’ll be off.” He walked a few paces, turned, “Safe trip.”

* * *

During dinner Yvette was light and bubbly, she discussed the art she had just viewed. While she talked, I saw a man who must have been in his late-sixties chatting-up a woman a of his vintage at another table. As Yvette’s discussion of brush strokes and emphasis of colour drifted past my ears, my subconscious focused on the man.

He looked as if he was trying his best to be charming and dapper. In a time gone by I thought he might have succeeded in enticing her, but physiology looked like it had taken hold, her libido lost along with time past. But he seemed not to realise this. Or perhaps he did, yet he hoped he’d be able to defy the odds. *But surely, she can see his intent, I thought. Surely there’s a spark of desire? Surely there’s a smouldering ember that could be coaxed into a glow, then a flame. . .*

I heard her say, “Well, I have to get to Hawker. Thank you for a memorable meal.”

With the smell of the wood fire being lit outside, he stood and walked her to the door. His heart must have been racing—mine would have—but it was clearly too late for words.

His opportunity to say, 'Stay, spend the night,' had passed when she uttered her goodbye. But like the fighter pilot whose reactions have grown slow with age, he too seemed to have lost his edge. I sensed his dream was vanishing. In the military, the saying was, 'There are the quick and the dead.' At that moment, he must have known which category he was in.

I could relate. My dream of Rose had vanished. I was too slow. I had felt like the school kid no one wanted to be friends with. I wondered if he felt the same.

He smiled, said, "Thank you," and she walked out.

I watched him as he returned to the dining room and occupied himself for a few minutes looking at some of the old photographs that were on the walls. I suspected he wasn't interested in the subject matter but was buying time so he didn't have to be seen crossing the yard to his cabin alone.

"How was your dinner?" asked Francis. While collecting our plates, he said, "Will you be staying long?"

I said, "No, we have to leave in the morning."

"Just tell 'em you got a flat tyre; stay another night. We've got John O'Dea playing tomorrow."

Yvette smiled. "We've got to get on the road, but it's been heaven."

"Well then, I must be Saint Paul." As the waiter walked away, he posited, "What more could anyone want?" and shook his hips.

I thought, *Peace in the Middle East. A world without poverty, disease, or illiteracy...* but before I got carried away with utopian wishes, I turned to Yvette. "I'm off to my room."

"Good night. I'm going to wait for the film crew to arrive; want to talk to them about their project."

"Sure, we're in no hurry, Copley's only a few hours up the road."

I watched her walk over to the bar, my attention on *her* swagger. How could Kurt not be attracted? I intended to find out. Tomorrow would be the day I started my search.

Seventeen



The travel books I read at Sydney Airport said that Leigh Creek was once located thirteen kilometres further south but was relocated in 1982 when the coal mine expanded. Its population was about 500—all miners who worked in the nearby coal fields. It was a modern town with all the comforts of a city, except for the fact that it was an oasis in the arid outback.

In comparison, the travel books depicted Copley as a speck of a town about five kilometres north. With fewer than a hundred people, it was the gateway town to the Gammon Ranges that lay to the east. That's where Arkaroola was located. The Gammons take over where the Flinders Ranges stop. Hard to believe there could be anything beyond here, but there was, including Birdsville, which was another two days' drive.

I'm pleased he didn't decide to go to Birdsville, I thought as Yvette and I drove through the last dried creek crossing before entering Leigh Creek. There was a large frontend loader scraping debris from the concrete ford across the creek. I noted how the forces of the swollen creek reduced everything in its flow to matchsticks. I guessed that the tumbling rocks produced an affect like a food-processor.

The various fords we crossed before this were the same, road crews repairing the storm damage. Creek banks were washed away and truckloads of gravel being dumped to fill-in the erosion.

Passing through Leigh Creek, I could see it was a mining town, rich and prosperous. When we arrived at Copley a few minutes later, I judged it poor from the housing standards. The mining companies that operated in the area built Leigh Creek to service their workforce. Copley didn't look like it was part of that dream.

Dust covered the town. Surprising how soon after the rain things dried out. It was as if a blanket of fog had descended. Only the headlights of the road-trains carrying mining equipment to the sites showed through the eerie haze as they passed-by Copley.

There were no painted lines, yet like soldiers on a parade ground pick-up trucks were all lined up, nose in, equally spaced. I turned the Holden into a vacant parking slot in

between two Chevrolet El Camino-like vehicles—*utes*—short for coupé utility. A Kelpie sat in the back of one. Covered with reddish dust, he didn't move, and showed no interest. Although my PI experience taught me to have the front of my vehicle pointing out for a quick exit, it would have drawn attention, so I blended in with the other vehicles. We grabbed our day packs off the back seat and headed to the front door of the pub. It had accommodation upstairs. I was relieved we had finally arrived.

We checked in and Yvette went up to her room, I fetched her case. I delivered Yvette's, but when I returned for my duffle, there was an old Aboriginal man on a dirty white horse a few yards away. He had a flat nose, wide cheeks; a captivating black face. His eyes were deep and dark, but there was fire in them. I recognised him as being in Kurt's Internet photo. He was wearing the same wide-brimmed hat, sweat stained and encircled with brightly coloured plastic ear tags from cattle or sheep. Around his neck was a necklace of multi-coloured old dog registration tags. He was arguing with the pub's manager.

"You'll not be bringing that animal in here," the manger stated.

The old man rolled a cigarette and pulled a few stringy pieces of tobacco that stuck out the end. "He won't make a mess like last time. Just want some grog."

"Leon, the answer is no—to both!" He shut the door to the pub, and I heard him throw a heavy latch on the inside.

Leon threw his arms up, turned to me. He pointed an accusatory finger and in a voice that I could imagine resembled an Old Testament prophet in some Hollywood movie, he said: "*He* told me you'd come looking for *Him*."

I frowned, "Who told you that?"

"*He* who makes thoughts visible."

I was mildly amused by his attempt to ride his horse into the bar, but this man in variegated homemade jewellery now had my full attention. "What's the person's name?"

"He's a Wiseman; he touches the people he meets." His eyes were ablaze with excitement. "He's here to create a Paradise for all Indigenous people who have been dispossessed of their land."

"Are you taking about Kurt Kerslake?"

"He's one of us—one of our Aboriginal brothers from America."

I nodded toward the front door of the pub. “What about the grog? Was that for you or him?”

“He has seen pain beyond belief. He has suffered a thousand miseries in the fires of Hell. Whites stole Indigenous people’s land and our pride. Grog kills the pain.”

I thought for sure that Kurt had to be suffering depression or mood disorder. I wanted to tell Leon that alcohol was a one-way ticket back to Hell, but I didn’t want to get him off-side. “So Kurt drinks?”

He clinched his face into a grimace accentuating the deep lines already creasing his appearance. “Yeah, he drinks . . . but the alcohol feeds his genius. He’s a dreamer! Sees things you and I can’t imagine. He’s going to rename your Thanksgiving Day, Invasion Day. Like us, he knows what it means not to be able to return to country.”

Wow, when Leon read about the evils of drinking, he obviously gave up on reading. Kurt’s propaganda seemed to be as effective as North Korea’s brainwashing program. I thought Leon might ask me to join him in lighting little candles to Kurt or dance under a mist of Holy Water.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. “I don’t think he’s creating a dream, but I tell you he’s created a nightmare for his wife.”

I moved closer. “Alcohol might take away the pain, but then *it* takes over. It’s slow death.” I gritted my teeth. “Where is he?!”

“He eats electricity. No one sees him. You can only hear his words!”

“What are you talking about, ‘no one sees him’?”

“He’s an oracle! He has enlarged our minds! Comes to us through the air like a spirit—uses the wireless,” and he waved his arms in circles above his head, his flamboyant plastic bangle necklace flapped up-and-down. I thought he was about to conjure up a lightning storm.

“The wireless?”

He pulled back on the reins and turned the horse’s head down the dirt road. The beast snorted. He dug his heels into the animal’s sides and it began trotting toward the edge of town. “The radio!” he yelled. “You listen; hear the Truth for yourself. Before the Age of Darkness descends!”

Leon certainly didn't need alcohol. He was intoxicated with the fantasies that Kurt painted. The thought of pursuing him flashed through my mind, but following him wouldn't have been easy—there was no place for me to conceal myself in the barren landscape and the dust the Holden would raise going cross-country would be like a beacon, signalling where I was. Besides, Leon was on a horse and could go where my Holden couldn't. I recalled the difficult surveillance I did the Nevada case. *This is going to be a rural investigation job in a whole different league.*

Eighteen



“I’ve made a few inquiries and think I’ve got a lead on Kurt,” I said to Yvette with some degree of professional pride.

It isn’t every day that a PI shows up at a location and an informant walks up to *him*. I wasn’t sure how he knew we came for Kurt—it might have been a lucky guess; it could have been that Kurt showed him a photo of Yvette and he recognised her when we arrived; or, it could’ve been that he was clairvoyant. Whatever the case, I was going to run with my luck; I wanted to wrap-up this job.

She closed her eyes, sighed. “That’s great. Can we please get him?”

“I said a *lead*, not a confirmation of his whereabouts.”

She shook her head. “So what are you waiting for? Go!”

“First, I need more information. Seems he might be broadcasting some sort of sermon. I need to talk to someone who can give me his location. Maybe there’s a local art group who knows of him.”

“Kurt was inspired by many artists, but recently he talked about several Australian artists. Even though they were white, they were interested in the plight of Australia’s original people.” She drew a breath, “Artists like Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd. They weren’t only interested in the distinctive imagery of the Australian landscape, but with righting the harm caused to Aborigines by decades of bigotry, prejudice, and misguided government policy.”

Hmm, misguided government policy? Detective Sergeant Lloyd Miller’s words about having a ‘unpredictable creature’ rang in my memory. *Politics. That’s what this was about.* Like religion and other ideologies, politics could easily slip from reason to emotion. Kurt appeared to have slid down a slippery-slope in his mind’s playground. Leon was another . . . and so were the others who were gathered in the SUV Internet photo.

I needed to find Kurt and bring his involvement in this sorry saga to an end.

* * *

I retrieved my netbook computer from my room and set it up on a table in the bar, the only place in town that had public Wi-Fi. Now that I was within reach of Kurt, I wanted to check for any updates to his Web posting. While my computer booted-up, I looked at the notice board. It had a copy of the dinner menu thumb-tacked to it. Next to it were the usual notices about no underage drinkers being served.

I started to read the menu but my eye caught the edge of a flyer pinned under a pile of more recent billings. It was advertising local bands, guitarists, and a stand-up comic. Instantly I recognised the pink shirt on a female entertainer. I held my breathe. Lifted the surrounding leaflets and stared at the old poster. It *was* her!

Faye was written on the top with *Singer and Songwriter* as her calling. The date was about a year ago. I took it off the board and asked the barmaid, “Can I have this?”

Carrie, who was behind the serving counter, looked up from reading the newspaper. A woman with a streak of bright lavender in her hair, she had a nose ring, and several ear piercings. Although only in her early thirties, she had a hard-cynical appearance from what I guessed was standing off nightly offers for dates from cheap drunks. Perhaps she was waiting for the right guy—someone with warmth rather than testosterone.

“Sure, I need to clear up that board one day when things aren’t so busy.”

I looked around, expecting that a bus-load of tourists were about to enter the bar, but I was still alone. *Busy?*

I gave her a half smile, “Yeah, I know what you mean,” folded the flyer and placed it in my back pocket.

As I turned to my computer, she said, “She’s a local you know. Famous! We’re going to get her back one day—sings real nice.”

My heart raced. I shuffled toward the bar. “She lives in the district?”

“No, lives right here in town. On the east side of the rail line.”

I thought quickly—I needed a pretext to see her. “I’m a big fan of country music, might get her to autograph this for me. How do I find her?”

“Cross the train line at the old station platform, head up Harris Street, look for the house with the beer keg for a letter box. You’ll know it when you see it.”

I've had a lot of clouds in my life, but occasionally one is accompanied by a rainbow. I was off to find the pot of gold.

So, I ran my Internet check on Kurt, found nothing had changed, and shut down the computer. I pushed open the door to the street, leaving Carrie with my netbook and the scent of stale beer.

* * *

I could barely hear the sound my footsteps on the drying dirt as I hurried across the train line. There was a flock of Sulphur-Crested Cockatoos in one of the eucalyptus trees that dotted the deserted station terminus. They were making a loud racket. There were so many of them they looked like Christmas baubles on a pine tree. Their dark black eyes, distinctive beaks, and yellow crests gave them the appearance of uniformed musicians in a marching band. Their sound came to a crescendo as an Aboriginal teenager carrying a sack of what appeared to be empty bottles gave me a wave as he rode past on his BMX bike. The birds then took to the air in cascade. A moment later, it was quiet.

No green lawns, no lush shade trees, and ill maintained roads, most of which were dirt. The houses seemed to me to be of the style built by government as a public housing project. Housing for those who had little hope of owning a place without help. Some seemed to have been empty, leaving behind partly stripped car bodies in their driveways, or on what might have been lawns. Dogs, thin but muscular wandered through the streets looking to exchange a pat for food. It had an almost ghost town appearance.

I could see Faye's house from several houses away. It was a standout with the aluminium beer keg that was crafted into a mail box.

The house was in better condition than its neighbours, but built in what might be called 'project homes.' It looked as if she tried to maintain it the best she could on a singer's wages. I stood in front, read the sign on the mail box—'43 Third Street,' and under it in a fancy script, 'My Comfort Zone.'

I muttered, "She was being literal."

It was a pale-yellow house made from sheets of fibrocement with a corrugated galvanised iron roof. There were three steps leading to a veranda under a wide awning that encircled the house. No doubt the overhang was to help keep the intense sun out during the summer.

There was an old two seater sofa on the veranda. That made me smile. I could picture Faye sipping a cool mojito, singing country ballads to the passing town dogs.

The door was open with just a screen to keep the flies out. I knocked. I could hear her voice call out from somewhere inside, “What?”

“I hear you need a man who can fix things.”

There was silence. It was a long uncomfortable pause. I wasn’t sure what was happening. Then came her puzzled words from what sounded like the back of the house, “Who’s that?”

“My visa’s good for three months. I can do a few jobs before I head back to the States.”

There was a scream of delight and she came running barefoot to the door. The sound of her feet echoed on the polished pine floorboards as she approached. I stepped aside as she pushed the wooden screen door open, slamming it against the outer wall, chipping flakes off the already peeling paintwork. She threw her arms around me.

“Can’t believe it’s you. How’d you find me?” She stopped and pushed me back a little, holding my shoulders. “You some kind of stalker?” She laughed. Her smile was welcoming. She shook her head, “I knew you weren’t into real estate. Those blokes always hand out business cards.”

I swung my arm in an arc sweeping the horizon. “I think the countryside is spectacular.”

“No fear of falling overboard here.”

* * *

Sitting on the veranda sofa I explained about being in Australia and looking for Yvette’s husband.

Although she made some remark about Yvette busying herself arranging her shoes according to heel height, it didn’t take her long to become intrigued with my manhunt. She suggested that we talk to Doris Wooragee. Faye suggested that ‘Auntie,’ as she called her, would know what was happening in the district. “Half of Copley is related to her and the half that isn’t, is related to the half that is.”

I got the picture—Auntie Doris Wooragee was the person to talk to.

But before we got up to go, she said, “Tell me about your wife. You must miss her.”

“I do. When she died—” I stopped because I could feel my eyes started to mist. “When she was told it was terminal, she gave-up on radiation and chemo. The disease wouldn’t let her eat. She could hardly drink. When she did, she vomited. She developed a blood clot and never regained consciousness. I wasn’t there to say goodbye.”

“Is that why you’re not a Believer? Because you think He took her away?”

“No, that only entrenched my disbelief.”

“I’m sorry,” she said and took my hand. Her strong grip emitted warmth, her skin was soft.

I composed myself. “Don’t be, her passing is part of life’s journey.”

“And I’m sorry about what I said on the plane—you know, about not caring about you losing your wife. I just thought you were looking for a free-and-easy-time.”

She reached down and with the same sturdy grasp that she first shook my hand, she grabbed me by the crotch. “I understand that in your line of work you need to make-up stories so you can get information. But don’t ever to do that with me. Never lie to me about us. If you do, I’ll take the rotary hoe out of my shed—” and she gave my manhood a squeeze.

“You’ll never have to do that,” I said, “because I’ll never lie to you about us.”

“Truth is more important to me than anything.” She moved her face close, her lips brushed mine, teased them, and then caressed them. A deep tender kiss followed.

Faye was weaving a spell and I was under its power.

“I want to be with you,” she said.

Nineteen



Her bedroom was large with high ceilings and two big windows. There was a ceiling fan, but no air conditioner. A door to the right led to an *en suite* bathroom that had a small shower alcove. It was all hospital white. It didn't look as if it had ever been renovated. The room was of the no-frills variety.

"I'm going to use the bathroom," she said, and disappeared carrying a towel. As I opened the windows, I heard the shower running. I leaned against her writing table that was opposite the bed and surveyed the room. The water suddenly stopped and I heard her call out, "If you can get away from 'Imelda' tonight, let's eat at Donna's."

Faye appeared at the bathroom door in a one-size-fits-all bathrobe and tendrils of damp hair. Even without shoes she was tall—her frame slight and angular; legs long and smooth. Without hesitating she stood in front of me, undid the terrycloth belt and let the robe fall from her shoulders. Her skin was well-toned. She smelled of a soft floral fragrance I couldn't identify, her rosebud breasts screamed out to be caressed. My heart raced. She stepped closer, placing the side of her face on my chest, wrapping her arms around me, clinching my bottom as she pulled herself into me. Her thighs parted and she began to rub herself against my erection.

She felt tender, warm, comforting. I missed being held in a woman's arms. I needed this.

She let the robe drop to the floor, bunching around her feet as she unzipped my fly. Her strong fingers reached in to expose me. With a gentle rocking motion, she rubbed me up-and-down against her zone. I could hear her breathing deepen—so did mine—and I could smell *her* over the fragrance. My senses were in overdrive. I wanted her. She wanted me to provide for her. At that instant, I had a vision of a woman drowning in deep shadowy water, reaching up for rescue. I was the one she was reaching for. I needed to be there to save her from the dark depths of her loneliness.

I ran my hands along the curve of her hips and guided her movements as she picked up rhythm. My hands moved with the moist skin of her waist—up-and-down. She was like a dancer experiencing the exhilaration of a bass beat, and for a long time she rocked rhythmically, all the while pressing her face close against my chest. Finally, she shuddered in quiet rapture, her rocking slowed, then stopped. I kissed her neck and asked, “Are you okay?”

She lifted her head and smiled. “I’ve got a cramp in my foot,” and we both laughed. “You don’t know how much I needed that. I can’t recall the last time I had sex.” She held my hands and her eyes beamed. “Thanks, you’re very kind, but I can’t leave you in that condition.” With perspiration glistening on the vee between her breasts she led me to her bed. I trembled inside.

Not long after, we lay next to each other, feeling the gentle breeze on my skin. I was drifting in a world of my own thoughts, feeling so comfortable in her presence that I hoped that this would evolve into more.

Twenty



A pair of galahs watched us from the top of a gum tree while we strolled through the township.

“So we’re going to see your aunt?” I asked.

“Doris Wooragee is an elder in the Aboriginal community. ‘Auntie’ is polite term of endearment for an Aboriginal woman,” Faye explained.

At the intersection, we turned north.

“I think I understand, my wife—” I hesitated, gaining the courage to say her name, “Ellen, was an anthropologist. So, I know a bit about kinship and the social structures of Indigenous tribes; mainly from listening to her and her academic colleagues discuss their research during dinner parties and weekend get-togethers.”

She regarded me with more than a bit of bewilderment. “So why me? I’m an entertainer. Been around a bit; had some dark times. People might think me as ‘damaged.’ Why are you be interested in me?”

At that moment, a sandy coloured dog wandered up to us and sat in the dust. We stopped and Faye greeted him, “Hello Barney, what’s up?” He just looked at us, and liked the wipers on a windshield, he used his tail to sweep slow semicircles in the dirt. We started up again, picking up our pace; the dog fell in step leaving a small cloud of dust to settle.

I reached for her hand. “That’s what makes you attractive. You’re honest. Easy to talk to. I like what we discuss; we share the same thoughts. You have ambition—you’re going back to study.” I paused. “And, for the record—we’re all damaged.”

I could feel her muscular fingers grip me, “You have a warm heart.”

No matter what she confessed would diminish my feelings for her. “I like you. A lot.”

She smiled, but I had changed the subject before my heart took over and I went on and made some awkward comment about love. Pointing to Barney, I said, “Hey, won't his owner miss him? On my way over, I saw a few dogs just wandering around.”

“Yea, Barney here has an owner. The others too, but this town's like one big backyard.” She pointed to the horizon, tracing it from east to west. “You see there is nothing out there—no suburbs, we're a small community. We look after each other and each other's pets.” Her brown eyes looked at me. “You got a family? Kids I mean. That you look after?”

“I've got three children, a son twenty-four and twin daughters twenty-three.”

“They aren't kids. They're adults. They live with you, at home?”

“My son's a lawyer, works in Chicago. He practises corporate law. Sounds boring to me, but he loves it, loves big city life. One of my daughters is a civil engineer, works in Canada as a junior on a gas pipeline project that runs south through the Yukon Territory. The other daughter is at med school, and she works part-time in gene research at a local clinic. She's helping to design drugs that target blood diseases.”

“You must be very proud. If I had kids like that, I'd be boasting to everyone. I can't have children. I've got problems with my uterus.” Her eyes moved slowly toward the sky. Her words came slowly. “I'd like very much to have known the love of family. I've never married—but I have ‘offspring’ of sorts—my children are my songs.”

I could hear the rawness in her voice.

“Like your children, I hope my ‘kids’ will inspire people, make a better world. We'd all like to leave our DNA to the future, but I'm not able, so I do it through my songs.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. As a wise man once told me, ‘it's part of life's journey’.” She reached down, held my hand. I could feel her inner softness.

I said, “It's okay to cry. It helps heal the heartaches of life.”

She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. At that moment, I could see the image of her waking up on the plane, massaging her eyes with the blanket.

“I feel comfortable with you,” I said and meant it, but it was a coward's way of avoiding the words I wanted to say; words I hadn't uttered to a woman in a very long time: *I love you*. But I hesitated. I wasn't sure if that would be too much, too soon. I was worried it might weigh her down. I sensed that it might be okay, but what if I was wrong? My discussions with Sophie hadn't anticipated I'd be at this point anytime soon, so I changed the subject. “Have you lived here long?”

“All my life. Born at Peterborough—you know where that is?”

“Yeah, saw it on the map, south-east of Orroroo.”

Her face beamed. “Yeah, that's right. Anyway, Mum and Dad moved here soon after I was born. Dad worked at the Coalfield; he was an electrician. Mum was at home. They both passed away in my last year of high school. They smoked. I don't, never did. Auntie Doris was a great support during those times, I didn't finish school, so she encouraged me to use my musical talents.”

“Ever thought of singing in the big cities?”

“Did a few tours of the capital cities. Don't like them. I liked Tamworth, the music festival. Played there every year; I haven't missed a show. That's where I got the gig on the cruise ship. An agent signed me up.” She looked at me with blushing eyes. “Won't be doing that again.”

“No, I should say not.” Now it was my turn to squeeze her hand. “So, London isn't on the itinerary,” I joked.

She flashed a smirk. “The thought of going to work in London is clichéd—anyone who wants to be someone tries that; once. I don't need to repeat their mistakes.”

“Pretty smart for someone who never finished to high school.” I thought back to the autumn leaves I left behind. “People need to learn how to flourish in the garden where they've been planted.”

“How true. My life's here. I want to be a teacher now.” She looked directly at me. “And what about your life? Is your life about tracking down missing persons?”

“Has been, but I quit my job with the PI firm I was working for, now I'm doing freelance cases. Like this one. I'm looking for a new garden to establish roots.” I wanted to say, *I can envisage a life here, with you*, but I didn't.

She stopped me, drew me into her arms. We kissed. It was spontaneous. I felt a closeness I hadn't felt for a woman since Ellen's passing. *How could this be happening to me?* This was better than winning a million-dollar lottery. It was like a shaft of light had broken through the clouds of loneliness and was shining on me.

But those thoughts were interrupted when I felt something rub against my leg. I looked down, it was Barney. He was sitting swishing his tail back and forth through the dirt, looking at the two of us as if to say, *feed me*.

Twenty-One



“He’s not like the others. Has manners. Speaks well, looks intelligent,” said Auntie Doris. She reached out, placed her hands on my shoulders. “He’s a keeper if I ever saw one.”

“He’s a Renaissance man.” Faye poked me in the ribs with her finger.

Doris Wooragee was a sturdy woman with a disarming voice. “Well, well, I do think you’re right. Come in, sit, I’ve got the kettle on. Peppermint tea?”

I had the suspicion that Auntie’s charm might have been a sign I was in for a cross-examination that would make a polygraph session more appealing.

I looked out the window of her living room at her front yard. Auntie’s yard looked like an Aladdin’s cave of mechanical junk. Old broken and disused farm equipment, car parts, diesel engines and car bodies lay here and there. I guessed she was in her late seventies, but she could have been older.

She told me she and her sister were educated at a Christian school in Adelaide. She received her degree from what she called ‘Teacher’s College’ where she majored in English literature. She had worked as a teacher with Aboriginal children before she retired. Now she let the local boys use her yard to repair their cars. She told me that it helped stop them stealing parts.

“He’s so much better than the others. Those ‘musos’ were nothing but no-hopers,” she said to Faye from the kitchen, loud enough for me to hear.

People do things for reasons, so I assumed she wanted me to note what she was saying.

“I knew you’d bring home a keeper one day.”

Faye blushed. “Auntie, he—”

“Oh, I’m sorry dear, I just assumed he was someone you met on the cruise. Silly me, I hope I wasn’t out of line.” I got the sense she didn’t care; she was no doubt fishing for information.

“Not at all,” I said as Faye and I walked to the kitchen. I tried to muster the courage to say, *I'd like to be the man she keeps*, but when I looked at Faye for a sign of how best to describe our relationship, she wasn't looking back; perhaps she was wondering what I'd say, and I suppose, wondering how I'd define our intimate encounter.

The issue was a potential double-edged sword. If I said we were a couple and she didn't agree, I'd be in trouble. If I said we were friends and she was expecting more, I was in trouble. I thought about Corey sleeping in the guest room because he didn't get Beth's birthday present right. So, I split the difference. “We're close friends.”

“Close friends. I see.” She emphasised the word *close* as she brought a pot of tea to the table. “Show me your hands.”

Trying to control them from shaking, I lent against the aluminum edge of her cream Formica top table, held them out.”

She ran her thumbs over my palms; rubbed the lines several times. Then she squinted at me. “You don't smoke or gamble. You drink, but in only in moderation. You don't own a racing yacht or a private plane. And, you don't throw extravert parties or womanise.”

I could feel my shoulders straighten, my chest puff-out a bit. “You can tell that from looking at my palm?”

From across the table Faye said, “Nooo. She's not a gypsy. But she knows what I'm not interested in in a man.”

The two women giggled.

I could feel my face turn red.

“So, what brings you to me?” asked Auntie Doris. She poured from the old container that so different to Yvette's bone china.

I explained that I was a PI and told her about the situation with Yvette's husband. I told her about how Faye and I met, my mission to find Kurt Kerslake, and my information that indicated he was somewhere near Arkaroola. I told her I needed to bring him back.

She listened intently and agreed to help. But she warned me that the small group of people Kurt was with were not to be trusted. She didn't like them. “They're into drugs, guns, and violence,” she said, then hesitated, and looked at Faye with a mischievous grin. “And that's just on Sundays.”

She and Faye burst into laughter. It must have been some local joke. Their amusement made me laugh.

Doris Wooragee was a woman full of grace. She leant across the kitchen table, placed her wrinkly black hand on mine. "I would like you to be the one she keeps too. But you're going to have to be more than close friends."

This was a woman of compassion who instilled confidence with an almost mystic perspective. I thought she was an example of why humanity needed to look beyond a person's race and gauge them on their character.

I wanted to say; *I'd like very much to have a life with Faye*, but I couldn't. There was something inside holding me back.

Auntie changed the subject. "The mob this Kurt fellow is tied-up with is out past Mount Rose, squatting on the old Yankaninna Station. It's about halfway to Arkaroola."

"Thank you. That's very helpful."

"Not so fast, young man. There's only one track in and you won't get past Mount Searle Station. There's a sobriety patrol and they have tall skinny mates."

"Their skinny mates?" I asked.

Faye explained. "They're an Aboriginal women's group who set-up a picket line to prevent alcohol from getting into the traditional hunting lands beyond the track tourists use. They have shotguns."

I looked at Auntie. She raised her eyebrows in confirmation.

Faye continued, "The cops don't want to know what happens out there because they know the problems alcohol causes in Aboriginal communities. So, they leave the woman alone, let them maintain the picket. White men mean trouble, they sell grog to Aborigines, so they're not welcome."

My new-found enthusiasm for finding Kurt Kerlake disappeared like water running down a drain.

Auntie leant over again as if she was about to reveal the darkest secret of her past. Not knowing what to expect, my breathing slowed. In a quiet voice, she said, "They're only loaded with rock salt. If you get hit, you'll be the sorest bloke this side of the Strzelecki Track, but you aren't going to die."

Faye's head snapped around, "How do you know?" Her look was of genuine confusion at this revelation.

In a hushed tone, Auntie continued, "Because I do the reloads. Don't either of you speak a word of this? The girls bring me their cartridges; I take the shot out and replace it with rock salt." She winked.

I looked at Faye and she at me. There was relief on both our faces.

"Mind you," Auntie went on, "you'll have one sorry arse if any of those girls pulls the trigger on her twenty-gauge." She raised her hand and clenched her fingers making an outline of a handgun with her index finger and thumb. With a sudden jerk, she slammed her thumb over as if it were the hammer of a gun being fired. "Bang!" she shouted.

This time no one laughed.

But I was still relieved. I thought she might have said it was kryptonite in those cartridges.

Twenty-Two



I could hear the sound from the big screen television over the noise of the crowd. There seemed to be a large throng assembled in the front bar of the Copley pub. The sounds greeted me some distance down the street. I pushed the door open and stepped inside. The lights were brighter than in an American bar and there was more socialising. There were men in groups; talking and joking. There were also a few women who didn't try to cover up their features, but on second inspection, perhaps they should've.

Yvette was there at a small table off to one side. She was by herself, drinking white wine from a cheap long stemmed glass. It wasn't crystal and, I suspect, not to her liking. I wondered how she would cope if we had to stay here more than a few nights. She was staring at the TV news. Some minor drama was being reported from a nondescript place somewhere in the world as if it was going to change the course of history. *Maybe it was.* . .

I walked over to her table, "Have you eaten?"

She looked up, surprised to see me. "Yeah, a steak. I needed a chainsaw to cut it. I think they eat buffalo."

"Might be why the dining room's called 'The Tough'." I pointed to the sign over the entrance to the dining area.

There were no beautiful people in beautiful clothes in this pub. No inspiring artworks on the walls. Just dirty mine workers dressed in tradesmen's clothes and above the bar a series of portraits of local men who must have done something important. Perhaps bowled-out a rival cricket team; or sheered the most sheep in a season, or bred a bull that won a prize in an agricultural show; or whatever it took to be a legend in these parts. The folk who were gathered looked like they came straight from work, or drove in from their farming properties if that was what they were called. *Farming* seemed such an odd term out here. It was so dry I couldn't imagine anything growing. Maybe that's why they were called *stations*.

"Where've you been?" she asked.

Her face was hard. I could tell she didn't like being here. I could see why. Most of the men still had their hats on. Their boots were the high-sided leather type, rugged. There was a young woman, mid-twenties, with short cropped hair and tattoos. She was standing with a few men with whom I assumed she worked at a mine; she wore the same style work clothes. She stirred the ice in her drink with her middle finger and then placed it in her mouth, sucking on it. The men seemed to enjoy the display.

I guessed it wasn't the type of gathering Yvette would have chosen to attend. Certainly, not the type of guests she'd invited to one of her gallery openings.

"I ran into the woman I sat next to on the Sydney flight. Had no idea she lived here. Anyway, we had dinner at Donna's Café on the next corner over. We should eat there tomorrow." But I knew Yvette wouldn't like that any better.

She didn't seem to be interested. She just appeared to be taking in the scene. Suited me because I was still working-out how I'd get past the sobriety patrol. I wanted to present her with a plan rather than excite her with more leads.

Then a skinny blonde backpacker brushed slowly against my back as she walked past. I looked at her in her sleeveless singlet that was two sizes too small. She had a look that suggested she did it on purpose.

Her breasts bulged through the yellow fabric as if someone had over-inflated a balloon. I tried not to notice her cleavage, or her tight cut-off jeans that barely covered her bottom. I pictured her as a spider looking for a fly. I turned away.

But the way men looked at her with their expressionless faces said more than any expression could. She had reduced herself to an object that delivered men animal gratification.

A group of four men sat at the bar exchanging glances at Yvette. In between they smirked and whispered short utterances under their breath. I knew something was up when the one with a two-day-old stubble, earring and shaven head paraded over. He held the back of his hand to his mouth and belched before he leant forward. "I didn't know angels could fly this low."

Yvette turned slowly, looked up at him and in a voice that could freeze Hell, asked, "What's your name?"

He grinned, "Viktor Gjeka," and threw a glance to his friends.

His friends snickered, the one with a tuft of hair on his chin raised his beer as if to say, ‘Keep going mate, you’re in!’

Yvette touched her hand to her chest, “My gosh, so *you’re* the guy whose name’s written on the wall of the women’s restroom; says you’ve got a needle-dick, you hump ferrets.”

His jaw dropped; he stood stunned with his mouth gaping. His friends turned away, went back to watching TV. He was on his own.

“Why’s your mouth open?” she demanded. “Did you forget your lines or are you trying to catch flies?”

He stood frozen; speechless.

“Listen, you’re pretty short; why don’t you think about dating Barbie?”

Ouch, I thought. *She’s heartless*. If she had put on perfume, it would’ve been Agent Orange.

One of his friends at the bar yelled, “Give it a rest,” motioning for him to re-join them.

As he walked off she yelled out, “Hey, can I take a photo of you, I want to scare my sister.”

“Where’d you pick up those snappy comebacks?” I asked.

“Boston bars. Looking for Kurt. He spent a lot of time in them—when he wasn’t painting. I had to fend off the drunken predators.”

The bartender splashed vodka into someone’s glass. Someone else turned down the TV and cranked up the music. It was a cover of *Spooky*, a slow jazz rendition, I didn’t know the band. Yvette grabbed my arm, stood me up, threw her arms around me, and held me loosely. As we danced, true to form, she led.

“Do you think I was too tough on him?” she whispered as we swayed to the beat.

I shook my head. “He’s proof dinosaurs still roam the Earth.”

Soon the song changed to something that sounded like it was played with an electrified strand of barbed wire, so we went back to the table.

“Thank you. You subscribe to the chivalric code. That used to bother me—I used to think its chauvinism—but now I find it a sign of kindness.” She beamed. “How we change.”

“It’s simply a display of social virtues—can’t see how chivalry is sexist. Anyway, it isn’t dead, though it might be on life support in this place.”

Yvette yawned and finished her drink. “See you in the morning.”

As she walked to the exit that led to the upstairs hotel rooms, Viktor hollered out, “Don’t forget your broom.”

“Lucky I didn’t release the flying monkeys.”

On the other side of the bar room was a neatly dressed guy. He had a spiky haircut and a neatly pressed Bundaberg T-shirt. He was sitting at a table by himself and I could see he was eyeing off Carrie. But he looked too shy to approach her.

It was then that the four at the bar turned their drunken attention to his hair. “What’s happened, mate? Why it’s all standing up? Did ya ride in the back of the truck with the dog?”

I asked Carrie for a Cuban rum and walked over to the spiky haired guy. “Don’t let ‘em worry you; they’re just visiting the planet.” I stuck my hand out and introduced myself.

In a reserved voice, he replied, “Harold Briggs.” He was medium height, not much of a build, but his clean casual clothes set him apart from the work gear the miners wore.

Viktor Gjeka and his friends were still mouthing sarcastic remarks in Harold’s direction.

I turned to face Viktor. “Hey, you still looking for the time machine?”

The room went quiet. Eyes glanced at Viktor, then at me. I got the sense Viktor might have taken it from a woman, but not a man.

He stood, placed his beer on the bar, and looked at me with menace. In a deliberate voice, he said, “What did you say?”

I thought, *You can’t scare me; I’ve got two daughters.*

I pointed, “Your bald head. Makes you look like you stepped out of the 1960s set for the Addams Family—you look like Uncle Fester.”

The room erupted in laughter. The blonde backpacker rushed over to him, ran her hands across his head, bent it forward, and laid a kiss on his shiny dome. Seconds later the two were exiting the bar; his hand pawing her bottom. The atmosphere became more relaxed.

I turned to Harold. “So, what do you do out here?”

“I’m a radio engineer, originally from Sydney, but been working in the bush for almost two years. Only been with El Dorado Mineral Exploration for a few weeks, though.”

“Don’t suppose you know many people in town?”

“No. Most of the blokes probably think I’m a nerd. Thanks for getting Viktor off my back. If I knew he was going to be here, I wouldn’t have come. He’s done this to me ever since I arrived.”

“You never have to apologise for who you are, and never to the likes of him. If you let bullies push you around, there’s no stopping them. Appeasement never works.”

I thought, *Poor guy, nothing worse than trying to fit in when you’re a little different.* He seemed pleasant enough. Then it dawned on me—*radio engineer!* “Know anything about CB radios?”

His eyes sparked with excitement. “Sure, why?”

“I’m looking for a guy who uses the CB to broadcast—” I hesitated, looking for right descriptor— “*speeches* to the Aboriginal community.”

“Oh, you mean ‘The Voice.’ Not sure what his ‘handle’ is, but that’s what I call him. He’s a Yank like you. Hear him now and then on my radio scanner. I heard him on my way here tonight.”

He was a nerd. But as the saying goes, a nerd is a four-letter word who can command a six-figure income. This guy was smart—I could tell. I needed him on my team.

“You know him? I’m trying to locate him, want to talk to him, person-to-person, not on the air. Can you help me?” I didn’t want to appear too keen, but the odds were stacking up against me knowing there was a blockade.

“Sure, but can’t say I understand what he’s saying.” His face flushed a little with awkwardness. “I don’t mean about his Yankee accent; I like Yank accents.” He glanced up at me. “What I mean is, what he says doesn’t make sense. It’s like listening to an Icelandic exchange student—I can only understand every third word.”

I don’t usually flash my PI licence. Some people think it’s pretentious, but others see it an emblem of serious work. I got the impression Harold was a serious guy. I slipped my black leather ID wallet out of my pocket, opened it and slid it across the table surreptitiously,

positioning it in front of him; making it a bit of a show. “I’m a PI, here to locate that guy and bring him back to the States. The woman I was with earlier is his wife. She’s very concerned.” I pointed my finger to the side of my head. “He’s not well, needs treatment. Can you help me locate him?”

He looked at the ID, appeared to read the details, and pushed it back. “Massachusetts?” He rested his back against the chair. “The Bee Gees wrote a song about Massachusetts. All about people who are trying to get back to the place they left.”

I said, “He needs to get to the place he's left, with the woman he's left behind.” I leant forward and slid my chair closer. “The police aren't involved. This is a private inquiry. My work is discreet. Can you keep a secret?”

Twenty-Three



His face was barely visible under the green illumination of the LCD screen of his radio scanner. I don't think anyone could have seen us sitting in the cab of his ute, but I wasn't concerned. I wanted to hear his voice, to put some substance to the man in my dossier photo. I wanted to get a sense of his personality and understand the man who walked out on a woman and a life that others could only dream of.

The screen scrolled with long numbers as the device searched the ether, so fast it was hard to distinguish the digits. Then like the jackpot on a poker machine the stream of numbers stopped and a string of figures appeared on the screen—477.375.

Harold's finger pointed to the digital display. "Listen. He's on UHF channel 39."

And I heard him. As clear as if he were next to me, his voice came through the vehicle's speakers. I could see what Harold was talking about, and it was a slow rambling sermon reminiscent of historical footage I once saw of Fidel Castro addressing the people of his captive nation. That speech went on for hours, and basically said the same thing—nothing.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"For that, we need to do some calculations."

From a storage box in the tray compartment of his ute, Harold got out a small antenna that looked like a TV aerial. He connected it to his scanner with a length of a black cable. Then he said, "See that set of bars to the right of the display? That's the signal strength, like on your mobile phone. More bars mean it's a stronger signal. I'll pan the horizon; you tell me when it reads the strongest."

Pointing his antenna at the skyline, he pivoted from left to right, as if he was playing a powerful spotlight on the distant countryside. Like a as a radar operator searching for an aircraft, Harold Briggs was searching for Kurt's radio signal.

"There! It strongest there," I told him.

He took out his smartphone, called up some App and said, “Remember this bearing,” and rattled off a series of coordinates.

I noted them on a pad.

“Okay, we need at least one more point to triangulate his position. Two will be better. Let’s drive down the track toward Arkaroola, see what we can figure out.”

We drove out of the town, east along the gravel track that eventually ends at what the travel books I looked at in Sydney described as some of the most rugged granite peaks in all the Flinders Ranges. According to the books, there are mysterious waterholes that form by the rains and natural springs.

As we drove, he talked fast, as if he had had a couple of espresso coffees. He told me about how Kurt was operating on a simplex frequency. If he were operating through the repeater at Mount Rose, we would have had to listen to him on his input frequency. He said, “People often get repeater frequencies confused because they forget about the offset.”

I wasn't sure what he was talking about myself but got the gist. I was confident that if I were to find Kurt Kerlake, it would be because of him.

We drove for a couple of kilometres and Harold Briggs did his radar scan again while I monitored the signal strength meter.

“Okay, we have two compass bearings. If we plot them on a map the point where they intersect, that’s where he’ll be. But because I’m only using a handheld Yagi beam, I’d like one more bearing, just to be sure.”

I was happy with that. I wanted to be sure too. So, we drove a few minutes more and repeated the procedure.

“Now, I need a map to plot the vectors. I can use Google maps, but I’ll have to get my laptop,” he said.

I said, “I’ve got one back at the pub. Carrie stowed it behind the bar. I can connect to the Wi-Fi there.”

* * *

This time, his face was illuminated by the colours of the Google map on the screen of my netbook. I read him the coordinates for the first two bearings we took, and he said, “He's at a place the locals call Goat Canyon. Read me the third and I'll confirm it.”

I rattled off the numbers and before I finished he shouted, “I knew it. Goat Canyon. He’s there for sure.”

He twisted the screen so I could see. His finger pointed to a feature on the map that looked like a ramp—a long sloping hill that was bordered on the other three sides by steep cliffs. Creek beds ran along the feature’s base.

“See, it’s a perfect spot. High and in the clear for a good UHF signal, flat on top for camping. And inaccessible except by foot.”

Then it dawned on me. “Or horseback.” That’s why Leon was riding. He was supplying Kurt with provisions by the only way to get across that creek—horse. I started to make a few notes.

“Here, do you need a light?” and he produced a small battery operated light.

“No, I’m fine. I can read in the dark.”

He frowned. “How can you do that?”

“I went to night school.”

He was the first person to laugh at that joke.

I asked, “How do I get there?”

Harold traced the route on the screen with his finger, pointing out that there was only one road for me to travel. He said the mountains and gorges prevented anyone from getting through any other way unless they were walking, or as I had suggested, on horseback.

When his finger traced across a place called Mount Searle Station, I made a mental note. When he finished his excited tour, I said, “See this place; it’s a problem.”

“You won’t have a problem. The track through there’s fine.”

“Not the track. There is a sobriety patrol positioned at that point to stop alcohol getting through.”

He squinted and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I have a plan. But I need your help. Think you can do it?”

He began to babble. “I always wanted to do something legendary. But that’s just a dream. The most exciting thing I’ve done in my trade was when I climbed a 20-metre tower

to install a microwave dish. Tonight's been the best time I've had, using my radios to track down a fugitive!"

I didn't want to correct him. I didn't tell him Kurt was just an errant husband. "Well, I'll tell you straight, if you assist me, you'll be putting yourself in harm's way. Those women at Mount Searle Station are armed with shotguns, and I have intelligence that tells me that they'll shoot."

He licked his lips and gulped. "I've never done anything like Michael Westen."

"There's little chance that you'll meet Fiona Glenanne on this mission, but are you interested?"

He hunched his shoulders. "Sure, but what if I let you down? I couldn't even deal with Viktor."

"Sometimes in the Game of Life, it feels like the umpire has looked the other way. It's not about being *the* best. It's about you being *your* best." I held my chest out in mock pride. "But the secret of success is never telling them how many times you failed trying."

He started to bite his fingernails.

"It's up to you, but if you miss this opportunity, regrets can pile up like books you never read."

He clutched the steering wheel. "We're not going to do anything that's illegal."

"It doesn't matter because this mission doesn't exist."

His eyes lit up. "We'll need radios and cyphers and—"

"Whoa, we're not talking about safeguarding NATO's nuclear launch codes. We just need a simple set-up so we can find this bloke."

He nodded, punched in a few numbers on the keypad of his scanner and I heard a weather report. It was an automated information generated by a metallic computer voice.

"What's that?"

Harold said it was being broadcast from the airstrip at Leigh Creek. "Heavy rains on the way. We've got to go in the morning."

Twenty-Four



I had just put my empty coffee cup on the table when I saw Yvette enter the dining room. Although the hotel didn't have a gym, she was dressed for a run.

"Thought I'd have some yogurt and juice before I did a lap of the town. Surprised to see you here."

"I'm on my way out. Received some information that might prove useful in locating Kurt."

Without hesitating, she said, "I'm coming."

Before I could say anything, I heard Harold's voice through the speaker/mic of the handheld transceiver he gave me. "Zulu Prime, this is Zulu Bravo."

"Who's that?" she asked.

"He's my man in Havana."

"Oh, you read too many thrillers."

Harold's voice came again. "Chocks away old boy, got to go and beat Jerry so we can all be home before Christmas."

Yvette screwed up her face. "What?"

"It's a saying. From the Second World War—British pilots were supposed to have said it before they left on their missions over Europe."

I pressed the push-to-talk key on the side of the radio. "Wheels up."

"Come again?"

"It's our counter-sign to start the operation." With a whisper of mirth, I added, "I'm thinking about calling it *Operation Ramrod*."

She ignored me. "Give me fifteen minutes to change."

My attempts to get her in checkmate have so far failed, but this tactic was going to give me victory. “Sure, I’ll be waiting outside by the vehicle.”

When Yvette went upstairs, I ducked out the door and met Harold in the parking area. “We’ll go in two vehicles. For redundancy purposes.” I lied, I had a plan for Harold; he wasn’t coming all the way. There were to be no witnesses if I had to bring Kurt back kicking and screaming. Yvette could deal with him at that point out.

* * *

Minutes later I looked in the rear-view mirror, I only saw dust. I knew by the time Yvette returned it would have settled, and she would have no idea where we went. After a few kilometres, I radioed Harold. “Pull over.”

We got out, and I had him help me collect a few old cans that lay amongst the remnants of a blown tyre, a broken radiator hose, and bits of an old fan belt that were strewn along the track. It was all a testament to how unmerciful the countryside was on vehicles . . . And the people who drive them.

We inserted a few stones into each can and put them on the floor on the passenger’s side of my vehicle. I was determined to bring Kurt Kerslake back, and if I had to play dirty, I was going to.

Harold was in the lead again when we turned north off the main track onto a narrower dirt path. It had a sign for Mount Searle Station.

The path was deeply rutted. There was a gate in the fence. It had a sign saying ‘shut the gate,’ but it looked as though it had rusted in position, like the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz*.

When we cleared the crest of a ridge, his brake lights came on. I got out and approached his ute.

He said, “Look, two hundred metres ahead, there’s the road block.”

I lifted my binoculars. “Hmm, we won’t get past it. There’s a barrier across the track. See, there’re three elderly women sitting in lawn chairs to the right. And they have shotguns.” What I didn’t point out was that the old dears were as fat as butter.

“Oh shit,” muttered Harold. He was biting his fingernails again.

“We’ve got to go now. There’s no second chance.” I grabbed him by the shoulders for effect, “They look as cunning as feral cats. So, this is your chance to shine. I’ve got a plan. Listen-up.”

* * *

I made my way to the ridgeline to our left and descended the other side using the gum trees and scrub for cover. When I was within throwing distance, I started lobbying the stone laden cans to my side of the barricade. They made a lot of commotion as they landed and rolled down the hill. The aging women stood up and ran, the best they could, toward the landing spot. They were hollering and shouting, pointing their weapons.

I threw a few further along, drawing them away from the road block. Then, on cue, Harold appeared over the crest, driving straight for the barricade. The women saw what was happening and turned around, ran back. By this time the old girls were tired from jogging to-and-fro. Nevertheless, they seemed determined to stop him and gave chase, their long skirts flapping like flags.

Harold turned his ute just before he reached the barricade and drew them up the hill away from me. He slowed so they could gain on him, then he’d sped-up slightly, leading them into the distance.

But suddenly, like a squad of soldiers forming a skirmish line, they stood, drew their shotguns. One of the women’s barrels flamed. Another gun barked in anger. And the third gun blazed as the volley of shot pelted Harold’s vehicle. They reloaded their single-barrelled guns for a second barrage, and the landscape was alight with more muzzle flashes.

Over the radio I could hear Harold shouting, “Unreal! I’m taking Delta Hotel.”

He was using military code for ‘direct hits.’ Harold must have thought it was a commando operation, something he never thought he’d be able to do. And it sounded like he was enjoying it. I was sure that his hair was standing up without the aid of gel.

Harold was being immensely brave to have volunteered not knowing it was all an elaborate bluff on the part of the women. Nevertheless, I’m sure he could feel each shot as it connected with his ute.

By this time, I was in my Holden barrelling down the track, straight for the wooden shafts that lay across the track. At the last second, I swerved around the barricade and was immediately heading up the hill on the other side. I had cleared the road block.

“Zulu Bravo, this is Zulu Prime.”

“Prime, send.”

“I’m Oscar Mike. Tango Victor Mike.” *I’m on the move. Thanks very much.*

I knew it was unsporting to give the old girls moving targets, but I needed to get on with this. If my plan worked, Harold would be doubling back to the main track that we came down. I had instructed him to wait for me just off the trail a few kilometres outside Copley and to monitor the frequency.

I was on my own. Finally! The only company I had now was a GPS with the coordinates Harold had programmed into it. If he did his job, it would lead me to Goat Canyon.

Twenty-Five



Goat Canyon was a rocky outcrop surrounded by a creek that forked around it; a sort of island with a steep slope leading to the top. The other three sides were cliffs forming a canyon.

I parked my vehicle facing the track from which I came. Then I crossed the dry stony creek bed and took up a position at the base of the hill where I had a clear sight to Kurt's camp at the peak. His bivouac was on the left side near the end of the cliff that overlooked one of the branches in the creek. Through my binoculars, I could see that it consisted of a two-person tent and a small pile of rocks that appeared to be a fire ring for cooking. There was an artist's easel, holding a canvas with a depiction of an Aboriginal woman. A basic camp, even for Boy Scout standards.

Around the perimeter was a series of tall wooden poles fashioned from tree branches. On the top of each was a severed goat's head. *Hmm, animal rights activists would paint his door red if they saw this . . .* I snapped a few photos with my smartphone.

I could taste the rain coming. It made me impatient. I saw the flaps of the tent open and an Aboriginal woman emerged. She was bare-chested and wore an amulet on a chain around her neck. I wondered if it was to ward off an evil spirit. Who knows which one—perhaps it was for the Commissioner of Internal Revenue. She walked to a horse that was tethered just within sight. She walked as if she was floating, mounted the horse, looked back at the tent, then rode down the hill, crossing the creek further to my right.

My mind drifted back to when I used to conduct stakeouts as a new PI. Fidelity investigations. After a few I didn't do anymore. I could never come away without being abused. If I didn't find the cheating partner, I was accused of being incompetent. If I did and got photos of the duplicitous couple, I'd cop a verbal beating for breaking the news.

I lifted my smartphone again and snapped photos.

A moment later, Kurt emerged without a shirt and was pulling up his trousers, doing up his fly and belt. He looked much like the photo in my dossier, only tired, unshaven, seedy. *So, that's Kurt Kerslake.*

I took a few more shots.

The sky to the west was growing dark. I could feel a few drops of rain. It was time to move.

I crossed the creek and started up the hill, weaving behind trees as I made a rapid approach. I wanted to maintain invisibility until the last minute.

I didn't know how delusional he was but wasn't going to chance my head ending up impaled like his goats.

"Kurt Kerslake?"

He spun around to faced me. "Who are you?"

"I'm a reporter with the *Wyoming County News*. I'm here to do a story about rocks."

"A story about *rocks*?" And he shook his head.

I stepped closer.

He raised his voice, "You come alone?"

"No, I've brought the Sydney Girls' Choir."

He grimaced. Pointed a finger at me, "Why are you here?"

I looked around the camp, sized-up what was going on. Surreptitiously, I captured a few photos. "Because I want to sit around your campfire, toast marshmallows and sing Kumbayah."

His eyes widened. "That's not true."

"What are you doing out here?" I asked without disguising my bewilderment.

He staggered, almost losing his balance. With Carrollian logic, he explained, "This is the promised land for the world's Indigenous peoples."

"This isn't your land; it belongs to another tribe. You need to come with me. You need rehab."

He put on his shirt and waved his hand at me as if he were trying to discourage a fly from landing. “So, my wife sent you. Well, tell her that society needs to put itself through *moral* rehab, like Germany did after the Second World War; like South Africa did after apartheid.”

There was a sound of distant thunder, which didn’t ease my tension. I was in no mood to be his social worker. “Hey, whatever world you created in your head, leave now! We’re now going to do what the voices in your wife’s head tell us. Get your gear; let’s go!”

He regarded me as if I was a lump of dung. “What’re you, some low-rent, dime-detective my wife hired?”

“Not a detective; an investigator. Cops are dicks; privates are investigators.” I didn’t dare tell him how much his wife was paying—it certainly wasn’t nickels or dimes.

His face began to twitch. “How’d you find me?”

“You’re hardly a ghost. You thrashed around leaving your footprints everywhere.” I looked at his camp. “Your Indian brothers would be horrified to see your lack of woodsmen skills.”

He chuckled, quaffed from a plastic bottle at his feet and began a rant about caves and tunnels; systems of interconnecting burrows that traverse the earth’s mantle. He said he didn’t need to know bushcraft because living at the earth’s mantle would provide everything; it would protect people from pollutants and rays emitted from the sun. Solar flares that emitted x-rays and UV radiation. He said the land at the centre of the earth was inhabited by herds of mammoth shepherded by the descendants of ancient tribes. His people. That’s why he was here in Australia. The idea came to him while painting; he had a vision that told him the tunnel entrance was in Australia and that it would allow him to descend into Paradise. The goats were a sacrifice to the leaders of the tribes. He said the cave dwellers were preparing to greet him, guide his descent to earth’s centre. “It’s a world of perfect social harmony,” he declared.

I recalled reading about people who believed in a Hollow Earth theory. A form of religion. I thought back to what Jack Pozzani said about people’s worship: *It gives them hope.*

“You know, if the animal liberationists ever find out what you’ve done here, they’ll do more than spray-paint a few slogans on your studio wall.”

He didn't hear me. He was still raving on about how the US Government had used *Photoshop* to alter satellite images of this part of the earth to cover up the tunnel's entrance, but *he* was going to find it. "They've put special electronic devices around the tunnel's entrance to jam GPS signals to prevent us from locating it," he ranted.

It was as if he'd slipped into the trance. It was as if he was having a nightmare and was talking in his sleep, or was speaking in religious tongues. But he wasn't; it was his defective brain cells. He'd gone mad. I couldn't tell if he was this way before he got here, or because he was here. But I was sure it was connected to either the alcoholic demons that took refuge inside the dark places of his mind, or the hallucinogenic drugs he took.

He said that he had a CB radio that was immune to the effects of secret government agents. When he arrived at the centre of the earth, he was going to set up a new World Government that would eliminate all other governments.

Then his speech began to slur, his lips didn't seem to work and his eyes almost rolled back in his head. He went limp, like a doll; melted into a pile where he stood.

I reached for his pulse. It was faint, but it was there. I looked around for his medication, thinking maybe he went into an insulin shock, or whatever Corey said diabetics were susceptible. My gaze shifted to a bottle by his feet. There was no label. I picked it up, it smelled unpleasant. Perhaps it hadn't been decanted long enough, but I suspected it was some form of industrial alcohol.

At that moment, there was a blaze of lightning overhead. The sound of the thunder echoed around the canyon.

Oh, shit! He must have drunk this in desperation. I wondered if this stuff fuelled his cauldron of hollow thoughts. Regardless, I knew I had to get him out of there or neither of us would survive the rising water.

His camp was a remnant of a carnival of twisted ideas. If anyone ever discovered what he was doing out here, no one would buy his work in *any* gallery. No serious collector would be interested in the ravings of some drug-crazed, alcoholic artist who was obsessed with the bizarre dreams that ran through his brain.

Lying in a heap with urine stains around his crotch, his face looked like a deep-sea diver who surfaced without the aid of a decompression chamber.

Then I heard the trees straining against the wind, groaning as if they were in pain.

It was likely the police would now have to get involved. I knew what the ramifications of that would mean for Yvette.

The rain started to fall. Hard.

I surveyed the site. It was difficult to see how Kurt could have enlarged Leon's mind. Hard to believe he was an oracle. Leon and his mates were apparently looking for a miracle, but all they got was a mirage. Kurt's late night radio listeners would have been better off listening to an audio book of Jules Verne's *The Underground City*. At least, that had a believable plot.

Kurt stirred, and muttered several incoherent strings of words about Indigenous genocide at the hands of the US Government; purveyors of indiscriminate violence against his people; the extinction of countless American Indian languages.

The mind is powerful, not only in a problem-solving sense—quantum mechanics, laser physics, the medical marvels that are awarded Nobel Prizes—but how it can drive people to do things beyond what they'd see themselves doing—heroic feats. It also holds people back—inflicting paralysing phobias, imagined fears, anxieties, emotional upsets. As he mumbled this soliloquy, I could see how his thinking had turned on itself, making him sick rather than strong, creating demons rather than angels. In any case, I was witnessing a man who had created another world in his head, a place where he had moved in, permanently.

I grabbed his arm and lifted him to his feet; rain was dripping down his face. “Have you finished feeling sorry for yourself?”

He had the same stare as the impaled goats.

I shook him, “Listen. You can't drown your daemons in alcohol. They know how to swim.”

He looked like he was deep inside his closet of nightmares. I pictured his mind as a helium balloon—I needed to get a grip on his string otherwise he'd drift through the atmosphere in whatever direction took his fancy.

I needed to get him moving. I would have prayed to anyone's God if I thought it would do any good. But a germ of an idea began to form. Then, it came to me. . .

Twenty-Six



“Hey, remember the big oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico?” I asked. “People forgot about it. Why? Because the NSA is data mining all our personal information and using it to target our brains.”

I shook him, “Listen, Kurt, you’re the victim of government mind control. People don’t realise that there are shadowy agencies out there manipulating people’s thoughts. You need help to fight them—I can deflect their psychotronic control. What you need is an aluminium foil deflector beanie. I need to get you out of here before it’s too late.”

His eyes brightened at my ridiculous suggestion. “Yes, before they discover I know about Hollow Earth.”

Despite him having his arm around my shoulder, his feet were behaving like streamers in a gale. He couldn’t keep one foot in front of the other; he was throwing me off balance. I grabbed tighter, but nothing about him was hard. He had a rubbery body.

The stench of rancid animal grease wafted from the foil cap I had fashioned from what was around the camp fire. So, when he lost consciousness, I swiped it off. At that stage, I slung him over my shoulders in a fireman’s carry and his weight propelled me down the hill. I stepped into the creek. The water was cutting a swathe through the landscape. His graveyard of failed ideas was about to vanish.

The water was moving fast, but only above my ankles. I hated the feel of the water squelching in my boots, but I fought the need to rest. It was difficult walking with him on my shoulders. His pudgy form clung to me like mud sticking to a shoe.

As the rain increased, the water whooshed past. I was mid-stream when I felt a plastic bag wrap around my leg. I cursed the camper who left plastic behind. I couldn’t reach down to free myself of it, so I pressed on.

Then I felt the bag move and thought it odd, but the wind was strong, so I didn’t give it any more notice. Until I *felt* it move up my leg.

I was balancing on what felt like a large submerged stone. I dipped my gaze, allowing my eyes to focus on my right leg.

It was a brown snake. Its head was about level with my knee, trying to keep out of the water. I'm sure the late-Steve Erwin would have casually reached down, grabbed the critter by the head and whipped it over his shoulder.

But Erwin I was not. I could feel the blood draining from my head. My peripheral vision started to disappear. Then, as if it was being played in slow motion, I could see my face falling into the flooded creek. I could feel Kurt's weight on my back pressing me under.

* * *

The sensation of water going down my throat immediately revived me. Gagging and coughing, I planted my feet on the stony creek surface and thrust my torso into the air. The snake was gone, but so was Kurt. Sucking in a quick breath, I looked downstream. I swayed from side to side as I run waist-deep with the current, searching for Kurt.

Then I saw him. His body was lodged in the branches of a dead tree. His head was upright, but it was tilting at an acute angle. Being pushed along by the deluge, I reached him in seconds. I knelt, slung his arm over my shoulder and hoisted him onto my back. I wasn't sure if he was dead or alive, but I knew we'd both perish if I didn't get us out of that creek.

I felt like a bobber on a fishing line—going up and down with the rush of water. I was tempted to bless myself with the sign of the cross.

* * *

I let Kurt's body slide off my shoulders and onto the passenger's seat. His head rolled back, there was a groan. I slammed the door, reached through the open window and grabbed his matted black hair, dragged him toward me. With his head out the window, he vomited. It reeked. It looked like creek water, but it had that factory alcohol smell. Nothing substantial came up.

There was more thunder. I saw the shadows cast by the dark blue lightning flashes as I revved the engine and speed-shifted through the gears. I could smell his sour breath as the rain pelted the vehicle.

Twenty-Seven



“Zulu Bravo. Copy?”

I heard some static, then Harold Brigg’s voice. “Send.”

I pushed the transmit button, “The package is about to be delivered. Drop the owner at the intersection where the rail line crosses the dirt track on the outskirts of town. I’ll deliver the package there.”

“Roger,” came his reply.

“Tell the owner its damaged. So, she needs to bring the *stuff* to repair it. After the dropped-off, return to the RV.”

I released the button. I could only hear static.

Then there was his reply, “Roger. Out.”

Now and again I stole a glance of Kurt, but my mind was on keeping at least two wheels on the track as we headed back to Copley. I hoped the sobriety patrol would go for shelter, so I could slip around the barricade without incident. When I got there, it was as I anticipated—a clear run.

I turned the Holden back toward the township. Kurt’s face was as lifeless as one of Madame Tussaud’s mannequins. When he opened his eyes, they took on the dull yellowish colour of a cheap tawny port.

Then he made a guttural sound that came from deep within. His voice was unnatural. “The rain is the heavens crying for me.” His eyes looked puffy as if he had been in a punch-up and wasn’t the winner. “My words will be a clarion call to the world.”

Lightning, the colour of cobalt, flashed in front of us.

Then he muttered, “The horror. The horror.”

It suspected that politics allowed him to see the world for the first time. But the problem with seeing it is that it is very hard to close your eyes once they have been opened—without a bit of help. In his case, that came from drinking. He had nothing to live for but distorted ideals. In the end, only darkness prevailed.

I reached across the cab, felt for a pulse. There was none. His head hung down, chin resting on his chest. I felt his wrist again but like the waters of a dark pond, his thoughts now ran still and silent. He had cast his last dream, but unfortunately for him, the tide was out.

I was powerless to intervene. It was like watching Ellen die. I recalled how I held her in my arms, trying to press my life spirit into her to prevent her slipping away. All the things she did in her life, were gone. Her as a little girl, growing up in Scotland, her first job, her university career, field research, publishing, marrying, kids, then death.

I thought about Kurt. I didn't know much about him other than the bits I gleaned from my background investigation and what Yvette told me. I knew nothing about who he was. All I knew was that people die every day. When they did, all they took with them was their memories. And all that is left behind is their memories.

What was I going to tell Yvette?

My training was to report the facts.

* * *

Ahead, standing on the side of the track just outside Copley was Yvette. She had on her R.M. Williams boots, tight jeans and a light tan leather jacket. It was still a bit windy, but the storm had passed as fast as it had descended.

Before I came to a stop she had the back door open and flung herself in. She reached across the back of the seat and hugged his lifeless body.

With lips trembling and shuddering voice, she said, "What happened?"

I explained, handed her my smartphone and while she stroked his lifeless head with one hand, she scrolled through the photos with the other.

She looked up, her green eyes frightened, helpless; she looked alone in a forbidding place. Holding the phone seemed to give form to all her fears. It was like she was Emperor Honorius watching the Visigoths coming over the seventh hill. I suspected that she knew her empire was about to fall.

She searched my eyes. Deeply. And for what seemed forever. At that moment, I thought if someone's eyes were the window to their soul, I had a front row seat to hers.

Instinct told me to drive to the Leigh Creek Hospital and let the medical examination process take its course. But that could mean ruin for Yvette, and for Kurt's memory.

I thought about it. If I lied and was discovered, it would mean revocation of my PI licence. Although the fate of the universe didn't depend on my decision, it was a conundrum that plague me every night.

I tighten my fists around the steering wheel, gave her a nod and said, "My instructions were no police, no lawyers."

Her eyes brightened.

I informed her, "There's no evidence. Everything you see in those photos is gone." And with a couple of taps on my phone, I deleted the pictures. A couple of more taps and I'd reformatted the phone, taking the internal memory it back to the factory settings.

"I don't understand; how'd his camp disappear?"

"PIs preserve evidence. Present it in court. Don't you think I know how to un-preserve it? I'm only a pseudo-Greenie, so I let the creek—that flood—take care of everything. Nothing from his camp will survive. Not even twenty FBI special agents could piece it together. And certainly, not Detective Sergeant Miller and that band of SES rescuers."

"What about your 'man in Havana'?"

"Never got near the place. Hasn't seen Kurt. That's why I got him to drop you here."

I looked at her. "As soon as we arrive at the hospital, it's going to be as busy as Boston Common. It's your call—what do you want to do?"

She started to rock like a monk in prayer. If she was hoping for a miracle, I doubted that any Devine Spirit could deliver that now.

Then she stopped. Like a Marine facing overwhelming odds, she appeared to be on the verge of taking the initiative—seizing the moment, improvising to overcome. Like the spot of blue sky that materialising on the horizon, I could recognise something in her eyes—hope. She muttered something about the American Indian philosophy on death.

I started the vehicle. I could tell she was about to do something bold.

* * *

I followed the voice instructions given by the GPS. It led me to what was signposted 'Leigh Creek Health Service.' I parked in the disabled car park near the front door and made a show of running inside.

"He's had a heart attack," I said, trying to sound more concerned than I was, feigning being out of breath. "In my car on the way here. Quick, he's outside."

The duty nurse grabbed her mobile phone and appeared to be speed-dialling someone.

When we got to the car, she felt for a pulse. But as I knew, there was none. His colour and general disposition must have told her he was beyond resuscitating. She looked at the two of us unsure what to say.

She came back with another nurse and an orderly with a stretcher. She said the doctor was on his way, "He'll need to examine him."

Doctor Huong Tran arrived in the emergency room. He was young. With a hint of a Vietnamese accent, he said how sorry he was for our loss. He asked Yvette if she was the next of kin and what happened.

"He had a heart attack. He's had minor attacks before and has been under the treatment of Professor Northrop Adams. You know, the head of cardiac research at Massachusetts General Hospital." She held up a small bottle of pills and shook them. "He should have been taking these, but hasn't been conscientious since he's been on vacation."

"So you are on vacation? From the States?"

"Yes, Kurt's an artist. An American Indian artist. He was here studying Aboriginal rock art painting techniques." I heard echoes of the words she used to describe Mrs. Walkley's painting roll out of Yvette's mouth.

"He's filthy. What happened?"

I said, "He went for a walk. For inspiration. He got caught in the storm. I went to find him. He was complaining of tightness in his chest, shooting pains down his left arm. I thought it was serious, so I collected Yvette and we drove here." I looked down for affect. "But I wasn't quick enough." I reached for Yvette's hand to dramatize my words. I didn't say anything about him being a fall-down drunk with cirrhosis of the liver, or him so desperate for a drink that he drank poison—the things I should have said. "He was a remarkable man."

He crossed his arms. “And who are you?”

“I’m his friend.”

“There’ll have to be an autopsy. I know nothing of his medical condition.”

With a smile so warm it could melt a tray of ice-cubes Yvette Kerslake said, “I don't think that'll be necessary, doctor. This is too traumatic for me as it is.” Her hand reached out and caressed his arm. “I'd like to take him home as soon as possible. You see, as an American Indian his spirit needs to return where it belongs—where his ancestors are.” She handed him her phone.

He hesitated. “What’s this?”

“Professor Northrop Adams is on the line. I phoned him. He’ll sign the death certificate.”

Doctor Tran took the phone, but as he went to hold it, she wrapped her hands around his and whispered, “After you speak to Professor Adams, I think you'll find that he might be interested in taking on a new registrar at Mass General. I'm sure that would be more agreeable to you than sticking out your residency here.”

Whatever I thought her reaction might be when confronted by these medical people, I was wrong. She was aa soothing as balm. Maybe there was something in her words about death and the Truth it brings. Or, it could have been she was just *alluring and very complex*.

While Doctor Huong Tran talked into the phone, I lowered my voice, “How’d you do that?”

“My father will simply make a little larger than normal contribution to the Professor’s research fund.”

I could hear Doctor Tran mumbled some medical terms; exchanged a few words of thanks, and ended with, “Okay Professor, I’ll await your email.”

“No need for an autopsy, Professor Adams will sign the death certificate. He’s familiar with Mr Kerslake’s condition. I’ll organise for Mr Kerslake to be flown back to Adelaide from the emergency landing strip in the morning. Mrs Kerslake, you’ll be more comfortable in the Leigh Creek Hotel. I’ll organise for your bags to be brought there.”

Doctor Tran turned to me. “I’ll book two rooms. Sorry, Mr— I didn’t catch your name.”

I stuck my hand out, we shook. I introduced myself. “Thanks, but I’ll be staying in Copley for a while. I have a friend who lives in town.”

“As you choose.” And he left us alone.

“What friend? That girl from the plane?” asked Yvette.

“Yeah.”

With an impatient huff, she said, “Yeah? No explanation?”

My job was finished. I did what I set out to do. This was my personal life. So, I dodged the question. “If I stay long enough I won’t have to worry about fitting snow tyres to my Jeep.”

She shook her head. “Send me your bill. I’m happy to pay.”

“What you paid already is satisfactory.”

“I can be more generous. By the time Kurt is buried, his painting will have quadrupled in price. His paintings evoke power and depth of emotion.”

I thought about Kurt’s painting of the Aboriginal woman that I threw into the creek.

“The three galleries that had been discussing whether they’d buy more of his work will purchase everything he has stored in his studio. Death brings the limited supply. Limited supply means the highest price. It’s pure market forces.”

I mused about Lucian and his global lecture circuit; wondered if she had heard his bottom-line advice.

She touched me with the same gentleness she gave the registrar. “I’ll add on a bonus. For the *discreet* service.”

Her offer made me feel unprincipled. I could have been insulted, but I wasn’t that proud. We all do what we need to do to get through life. I did what I did to help her through her storm. Kurt was dead. He’d caused her misery. She waited for him to give her a child—waiting for a ship that she thought was somewhere over the horizon. *Any day now*, I’m sure she kept telling herself. But that ship never came. How wrong I was when we met to think she might have been ill-treating him. She wasn’t a woman I could relate to, but she was human. And she had to get through life carrying the burden she just inherited.

I smiled. “Thanks. You have my bank details. I’ll leave it for you to decide.”

Twenty-Eight



I swung the nose of the Holden into a vacant park in front of the pub. This was our RV. There were only a few vehicles, but I could see Harold sitting in his ute. No doubt he was still monitoring the radio scanner.

“Hey, looks like you went for a swim in that creek,” he said, poking fun at me.

“Yeah.”

“Wonder if you saw any crocs?”

“No, the sharks scared them away.”

He gave a booming laugh. “What happened?”

“Doc says it was a heart attack.”

“Sorry to hear. She okay?”

“She’ll be fine.”

With sincerity in his voice, he said, “I’d like to thank you for what you did for me. The opportunity I mean. No one has ever included me in anything like that before.”

His words made me proud. Facing those shotguns was a mighty feat. Believing that there was lead shot in those blasts would’ve given most men a cold sweat. But in his case, it elevated his inner strength.

I stuck out my hand, “Well, I’d thank you for your help, but because the mission never existed, I can’t.”

His face glowed, he squeezed my hand with zest. “Roger that! I suppose your work is finished. Heading home?”

No, Mrs Kerslake will be taking her husband’s body home tomorrow morning. I’ll be staying on, with my—” I cleared my throat, “—with my girlfriend.”

“Didn’t know you had a girlfriend. You work fast.”

“Maybe I’ll see you back here for a drink tonight.” But I paused when I looked over his shoulder. “On second thought, looks like Viktor Gjeka’s mates are over there. Must be waiting for him. Perhaps we should steer clear of this place.”

His two goonish friends were sitting on the hood of their light truck drinking beer from cans.

“I’m not going to let them push me around anymore.”

“Hey, don’t do anything stupid, that’s why we have politicians. Let me check out. I’ll get my gear and see you here in a few minutes.”

I saw Carrie, paid my bill and went upstairs to collect my duffle bag.

On the way down I heard a man screaming in agony.

Harold? What’s he done?

I leaped two steps at a time, jumped down the last four, and pushed open the door to the street. I saw Harold. He had one hand on Viktor’s backside, the other grabbing his collar. He was frogmarching him out the pub’s main door.

Gjeka landed face first in the mud and skidded to a stop. He rolled over yelling, “You broke my fucking hand. Busted my bloody arm.”

His friends rushed over, stood him up and walked him to their truck.

“Get him a bucket of cement, he needs to toughen up,” taunted Harold.

Over his shoulder, Gjeka bellowed, “I’ll come looking for you.”

With his hands on his hips, Harold said, “Come. I won’t be hiding.”

“Hey, I was only gone a few minutes, what happened?” I asked.

He said, “I heard Carrie shouting for him to get out. I went in; Gjeka was telling her that women were only good for one thing; providing something soft to lie on while having sex. I remembered what you said—appeasement never works—so I told him to shut his mouth and get out. He took a swing at me. I ducked. He smacked the wall. The rest you saw.” He winked at me. “I think Carrie will see me in a different light.”

I gave him the thumbs up. “But, I think Viktor’s going to de-friend you on social media.”

* * *

I pulled the Holden over to the side of the gravel road that crossed the train line. I cast my weightless gaze across the horizon. My limbs felt loose. I was content with no need to fill the silence. It was a moment of clarity. But, in that instant I realised I was able to make the wrong decision. Memories whorled around in my head like a carousel that was out of control. I needed do something different.

I turned off the engine, dialled Sophie. It rang several times, then switched to her message service. I disconnected. It was early in the morning for her, so I figured she'd be driving to work. I tapped out a quick message explaining what I had in mind and pressed the send key.

The wind had died down. There were only one or two clouds about, I could see the setting sun's rays striking the landscape, the azure sky. It was throwing long colourful shadows that had warmth.

My phone chimed. It was Sophie. My message must have grabbed her attention.

"I'm glad you told me what you're thinking because I need to explain a few things," she said. "You'll never figure it out on your own." Then with her hallmark drawn-out inflection, she said, "If you don't do as I say, I'll hate you forever."

She then gave me her advice . . .

* * *

We sat on her front veranda nestled between the arms of her two-seater sofa. Faye was wearing a tapered white embroidered linen blouse. I was covered in dried creek mud. She was sweet-scented. I needed a shower.

I could see Barney lying on a damp patch of ground near the gate. He didn't seem to mind.

"You're such a pleasant change from the blokes who work in the music industry. They think because they see you in the dressing room in your bra you'll fall for their pick-up lines."

In the distance, I could hear the approach of the coal train. It was starting its long haul from the mine site, to the Port Augusta power station, about a five-hour trip to the south.

"No matter how big they build aircraft or how fast they fly, the east coast of the States will always be on the other side of the world," I pointed out.

“Listen—” she hesitated, “—if you found work around here. . . you could stay.”

I interrupted. “Henry Miller once said, ‘The main thing is to eat. Trust Providence for the rest.’ Work isn’t the worry.”

With rawness in her voice, she put it to me, “We’re too old to be coy. I feel it. I need to know whether you feel it too.”

A lizard wandered across her front yard. Its body was shifting from side to side in a choreographed display of slow motion. But my heart was pounding at 160. I didn’t know what was worse—trying to muster the nerve to say it, or face Sophie if I didn’t. “I’ll be honest with you. I won’t lie. You’re *not* a close friend to me.”

Her lips quivered. She blew out a short breath. When I looked into her eyes; I couldn’t see the color—they were glazed with mist.

With the last rays of the day dancing on Barney’s back, I thought about the new cards I had drawn from the deck at the Table-of-Life. They were the result of a stroke of fortune. I looked around. Although there weren’t the autumn leaves in the sun-dappled woods of back home, I was convinced that this was a garden where I could flourish. Becoming dew-eyed myself, I managed to say, “Because I want you to be my fiancée. I love you.”

Her eyebrows squeezed together as she focused. “Are you asking me? I’ve never been asked.” A mischievous smile appeared on her face, “Except by blokes who had far too much to drink.” But before I could say anything, she added, “You won’t regret asking, if that’s what you’re going to do.”

I felt her linen blouse brush my skin. I could smell her floral fragrance.

Her eyes flickered. “I’m completely in love with you.”

I looked at her and the dam holding back my tears burst. They streaked down my face in a parade of joy. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my old wedding ring. I’m sorry, I didn’t have time, but would you accept this as a promissory until I can get you a proper one?”

~ End ~