

My Brother's Keeper

By Anthony Browne

Autumn

One

Rose entered the deeper water of the channel. The sand became fine, silt-like. Sharp edges of shells pressed into her feet. Cool water climbed her calves with each step, tickling the soft skin on the back of her knees.

On the far side of the estuary marram-grassed sand dunes met blue sky. The dunes ran along the entire the horizon. From the grassy headland at GUNNANUNDI Point north to the mouth of Broken River. Beyond the dunes waves crashed. Their seamless roar drowned out the cawing oystercatchers. They had menaced Rose all the way from the shoreline, but were forced to remain at the edge of the shallows. From there they continued to vigilantly pace, shouting shrill warnings. *Keep clear of our nests.* She wished she could reassure the birds, explain that she was just like them. A mother. Watchful. Overprotective. She looked over her shoulder to a flash of colour peeking out from the base of the old Morton Bay Fig tree that straddled the shoreline. There, wrapped in a florid patchwork quilt, baby Lucinda slept. The wizened buttress roots of the elephantine tree provided a natural cradle for the child. Rose imagined herself prowling protectively in front of the tree, screaming at a perceived threat. She was able to excuse the angry little birds for their aggression towards her.

She wriggled her toes into the sand until they touched upon the jagged edges of the cockles she sought. Drawing out a hessian sack from where she had tucked it at the back of her frock Rose folded forward. Her chin was able to remain just above the

waterline as she probed the estuary floor. As her fingers encircled the shells they clamped closed. Sometimes they would pinch her skin, causing her to flinch.

Rose worked quickly, eager to get back to Lucinda before she awakened. The repetition of foraging in the sand gave her a sense of calm. As she bent forward she could feel the weight of her head pulling her neck and shoulders open, her spine stretching out. She stood periodically, bending back to release the strain in her lower back, each time glancing to the shoreline to check on Lucinda, seeking out the mosaic colours of her quilt.

Gradually the hessian bag filled and became heavy.

Rose completed her harvest and was returning to the shore when goosebumps shot down her arms. The wind which had been running from the west, hot and dry, had suddenly died away.

The day's light faded. As if a storm was brewing. But the sky remained clear.

The oystercatchers fell silent. Their heads no longer bowed forward like warring goats. With raised beaks they looked to the sky as if they, like Rose, were struggling to understand what was occurring.

As the daylight continued to evaporate around her Rose looked up towards the sun and realised that a solar eclipse was occurring.

She had witnessed a solar eclipse only once before, as a schoolgirl.

She remembered their Fourth Grade teacher had come prepared for the rare event. The children arrived to find shoe boxes piled high on every desk. They spent the

morning constructing pinhole cameras, carefully cutting off one end of each box, then taping them together. They carved a flap out of one side to act as a viewer then glued a small square of tin foil over a postage-stamp sized hole in the top. The teacher inspected each student's work before gently pushing a needle through the foil to create the pinhole that gave the camera its name.

Across the room Rose saw one of her classmates Regan Thorn had ignored the teacher's advice collected surplus shoe boxes to make a camera that was double length.

After lunch they were shepherded onto the school's assembly area. Rose sat on the hot asphalt to wait, waving away flies.

The Principal's voice rang out.

'Under no circumstances are you to look directly at the sun whilst the eclipse is occurring. You must only look through your cameras'.

The reminder was unnecessary. Earlier in the day their teacher had demonstrated the sun's power by burning a hole through paper with a magnifying glass.

Their teacher called out.

'Get ready children'

Rose stood and aligned her box to the sun, tilting it carefully so that only the end and not the sides cast a shadow.

Then with only seconds to go Regan Thorn's double-length contraption, held up on an angle to the sun, buckled under its own weight. It broke in two at the seam closest to its base. His face creased in anger with the realisation that it was beyond repair.

He threw his useless device to the ground, jumping on top of it then kicking it away. Then, before the other kids could pull their cameras out of his reach, Regan danced from one to the next, plunging his finger through the foil lenses.

A teacher had seen Regan's tantrum and rushed forward to grab him by the ear. He hauled Regan out but for Rose and three others, it was too late. Their pinhole cameras were ruined and they would not be able to view the eclipse.

Heat rushed into Rose's cheeks. Through tear filled eyes she saw Regan being berated by the teacher. His indignation grew as Regan smiled in response. The spectacle momentarily stole interest away from the eclipse before the Principal's cry reminded them it was starting. Rose looked sadly at the camera she had painstakingly constructed, the gaping hole in its lens having rendered it useless.

A single tear fell onto the side of her shoe box making a blister in the cardboard. At that same moment Rose felt a touch on her forearm. Conner Thorn, Regan's twin brother, held out his camera. It was not as tightly constructed as her own, but sufficient to view the eclipse. Through her tears Rose smiled and accepted the box. She aligned it to the sun and peered through the viewer. The circle of light projecting onto the cardboard became a semicircle. A crescent. A slither. Finally it disappeared completely before beginning to emerge again on the other side.

The teacher, having seen the example set now called out.

'Share you cameras please children. One between two.'

Rose handed Conner back his camera with a grateful smile. Looking past him she saw Regan standing alone on the steps that led to the Principal's office. He was staring into the sun.

The sound of Lucinda crying brought Rose back to the present. With a jolt she realised that like Regan all those years ago she had been staring directly at the eclipse. She snapped her head away sharply to avert her gaze.

Covering her eyes with her hands she saw a kaleidoscope of rings and half crescents projected onto the inside of her eyelids. She pressed the meaty balls of her thumb into her eye sockets, pushing hard into her eyeballs, causing the circles to twist and contort. The coolness of her palms, still wet with seawater, was soothing. Releasing the pressure, the white blobs split into tiny particles, fleeing to the corners of her vision.

Lucinda's crying became more insistent. Rose released her hands and opened her eyes, but found the afterimage of the eclipse was still burnt into her view. She gazed in the direction of her daughter's cries but was no longer able to make out the bright splash of colour. The Morten Bay Fig was no more than a blur on the horizon.

She reached down for the hessian bag. In the periphery her vision was clear, but to her frustration cloudiness followed her line of focus. Kicking a foot out clumsily she hit her toe into the bag, swore under her breath, then reached down to pick it up and haul it over her shoulder.

She began wading into the shallows. As if a switch had been flicked the sun's warmth returned. The angry cries of the oystercatchers began once again. Her empathy had disappeared and she kicked out in their direction, spraying a plume of water. This retreated but at the distress of their screams grew.

She arrived at the shoreline buoyed by the discovery that blinking could momentarily clear her vision like a car's windscreen wipers. She approached the spot where she had left Lucinda sleeping, blinking her eyes rapidly. Scooping the bundle into her arms she brought the baby up to her face. She reached under Lucinda's tiny shawl to touch her hand to her daughter's head, breathing deeply to fill her nostrils with the scent of her milky breath. She kissed the baby's forehead lightly then unclipped her frock at the shoulder and lowered Lucinda to her breast.

She stayed under the shade of the tree until Lucinda finished feeding. Blinking her eyes she began to make her way back up the stony path to the fence at the end of the farm and up and over the rickety wooden stile with the greatest of care, judiciously balancing the weight of Lucinda and the sack of cockles. She walked in the lengthening shadows of the long line of gum trees that pointed the way back to the sagging, paint-bare cottage that was her home. The westerly had returned blowing leaves down into her path.

Her blurred vision remained into the evening. She bathed Lucinda and put her to bed then shelled cockles and simmered them with boiled spaghetti and crushed tomatoes.

After dinner Rose would normally read, and she was at a particularly gripping stage of *Wuthering Heights*, but her clouded vision made it impossible. She sat in the dusty sitting room at the front of the house, her small frame dwarfed in one of the old armchairs. Her fingers absently traced the foam stuffing that sprouted from the front of its threadbare armrests.

When she closed her eyes the impressions danced around, like fairies. She wished she could organise the shapes into pictures to tell a story, but they eluded her.

If she scrunched her eyes tightly, discs of white and black passed across the insides of her eyelids. The eclipse was recreated, light obscured by darkness.

Two

At the Kings Cross end of Victoria Street Regan Thorn sat waiting for the traffic lights to change. He drummed his thumbs against the steering wheel, playing along to a Beatles tune on the radio.

Jojo was a man who thought he was a loner,

But he knew it couldn't last.

Though it was not yet midday, the Cross thronged with servicemen. Their military crew-cuts and starched white and khaki-green uniforms stood out against the long hair and psychedelic clothes of the local hipsters. Regan couldn't work out who looked more stupid.

The sailors and soldiers buzzed with the excitement of boys on a school outing. They loitered under gaudy neon signage and sauntered in and out of dingy alleyways.

'Get back, get back' Regan sang along. 'Get back to where you once belonged'

He revved the engine impatiently. A couple of American sailors, dressed in white crossed at the lights. Draped between them was a local girl, a blond with a short skirt and too much makeup. She was laughing like a hyena at some joke they had told.

'Get back, get back' Regan leaned out the window and sung on in a louder voice. 'Get back to where you *fuckin'* belong'

The Americans looked around.

'Get back *Yankee*, go home, yeah!' he sang

The light turned green and Regan dropped the clutch.

The sailors leapt towards the curve, dragging the girl, who seemed oblivious to what was happening with them. Regan twisted the wheel at the last moment, swerving by a sufficient margin to miss them by an inch.

'Asshole!' one shouted indignantly, whilst the other waved a fist in the air.

On another day Regan might have stopped to remind those Yanks just whose country this was. Today he had business to attend to. He accelerated away down Victoria Street giving them nothing more but a glare in the rear mirror.

Halfway down the street he pulled the car into a vacant space in front of a row of derelict sandstone terraces.

The lower windows and doorway the houses were boarded up with cheap plywood. After each eviction Regan made sure his guys moved in quickly and trashed the place then got everything boarded up real tight.

One house further down had been burned. The tall windows that looked out onto the ground floor balcony were sightless voids ringing with jagged broken glass, above them black marks scorched the sandstone. The terrace had been torched in what his boss Frank Sheldon referred to as a 'second-stage eviction'. Regan smiled. Nothing like a petrol bomb through the window to encourage people to fuck off and not come back.

He stepped onto the footpath then turned back to admire the sun gleaming off the gold paintwork. A leaf had wedged itself under the top of the bonnet and he reached across to grab it off, crushed it and tossed it to the ground.

He began walking along to a point further along the block where plumes of powdery white dust hung. He could hear the rattle of jackhammers, the drone of bulldozers, the dull thud of a wrecking ball. 'The soundtrack to progress Sheldon' called it.

Above the din he could hear raised voices. They belonged to a group of men on the footpath, standing adjacent to the fenced off demolition area. Two of the men were engaged in a heated argument, one of them was his colleague Elias.

Regan strode down the street, the wooden heels of his boots sounding hollow. He walked past a ragtag group of men straddling the edge of the roadway. Some leant on shovel handles whilst others brandished metal crowbars. Most had long hair, others sported tattoos and all wore tight t-shirts, bell-bottomed jeans and canvas sneakers. Though Regan didn't bother to look at them he could tell they were eying him up and down, taking in his pointed shoes, polyester trousers and white silk shirt. A hush fell over them as he passed.

He approached the group that was arguing.

Elias was a swarthy Lebanese known in boxing circles as a dependable journeyman. Muscles budded from his shoulders and engulfed his neck. He towered over a bald, round-bellied man with the beetroot complexion of a heavy drinker. He wore work boots, overalls cut-off above the knees and a sweat-stained singlet. Regan hoped he didn't smell as bad as he looked. Under his arm he held a hardhat which, judging by

the indentation ringing his forehead, he had only recently removed. Regan recognised him as Pat McGowan, a Scotsman and foreman of the construction crew that were currently overseeing the demolition of the terrace houses.

Two uniformed police officers not much older than Regan looked bored and said nothing.

The click of Regan's heels sounded his arrival. Elias, who been making an argument in his heavily-accented baritone, fell silent. He turned, squinting into the sun.

'Hi boss.'

The corners of Regan's mouth turned up in a half smile. He looped his thumbs over the top of his crocodile-skin belt, pulling himself a little taller.

He ignored the other three men and addressed Elias.

'What's the problem here?'

'Same bunch of squatters we turfed out last week' Elias replied, glancing nervously to Pat McGowan.

'Well evict them again'

'Now look here lad' began McGowan, jabbing a podgy finger in Regan's direction. 'I've spoken to these people and they say they paid rent for this there house and according to the law have rights.'

Regan turned slowly to face the Scotsman, his eyebrows arching up over the rims of his sunglasses. 'And pray tell me, are you some kind of lawyer?' he said, gesturing at his attire and smiling.

McGowan's face reddened. With gritted teeth he stepped closer, the finger he thrust forward only inches from Regan's face.

'I'll tell you who I am lad' he said, specks of spittle flying from his mouth. 'I am a union member and a workingman. I am the foreman of this here crew' he swung his thumb over his shoulder towards the dust and rubble behind him before returning the hand to prod once again towards Regan's face. 'I and only I decide whether these bulldozers roll, or whether we walk off this site. These here people are entitled to compensation or re-housing, neither of which they have been provided with. It's the *law*' he said while glaring at the two policemen.

Regan glanced at the cops too. They looked blankly back. The police would not intervene except to support the eviction. Their collaboration had been bought and paid for by Frank Sheldon. The cops would stand by and ignore any breeches of the law that would occur in the course of an eviction. Sometimes if the urge took them they would swing their batons alongside Elias and his group of thugs.

Turning to face McGowan he took a half step back before speaking. 'Now let's all just calm down here' he said holding his palms open in a gesture of reconciliation. '*Of course* we will ensure that these people receive what they are entitled to under the law. But they also must obey the law. As you know Pat, this project has been duly

consented by the City. We are legally entitled to remove these squatters, tenants – call them what you will.'

McGowan lowered his finger. 'Well then you won't be needing that mob of hooligans then.'

Regan looked to Elias. The Lebanese shrugged, his head disappearing even further into his immense shoulders. He turned back to McGowan. 'OK you win. No heavies. But as soon as we get these people out you and your men better turn that house into dust before they can even think of moving back and causing us more trouble.'

He turned his back on the Scotsman.

'Elias, let's go and talk to these good working people and ensure they are aware of their obligations and entitlements.'

Regan led Elias off the footpath and onto the cracked tiling of the entrance path. Once out of earshot Elias leaned into Regan's ear.

'Boss I didn't think we could give them no compensation?'

Regan reached the front door, turned and smiled over Elias's broad shoulders at Pat McGowan. He grabbed Elias' left hand and balled it into a fist. 'This,' he said looking Elias in the eyes, 'is compensation. And this,' he covered the right fist, 'is paid relocation. You are going to ensure that they receive a generous allocation of both.'

They forced their way into the barricaded house and discovered a man and a woman lying on a filthy mattress in the middle of the floor, barely conscious. Several bottles of raw spirit lay empty beside them and the room stank of god-knows-what. Elias had needed to revive them before he could begin dealing with them. Regan hoped that the noise coming from the construction site next door was sufficient to mask the sounds drifting up the stairs.

Regan climbed the stairway to the first floor. He proceeded with caution, testing each step with one foot before gingerly transferring his weight to it. The old home had been long neglected and was in a dangerous state of disrepair. The thick outer walls were constructed from sandstone, and apart from a discolouration of moss, mould and grime were in original condition. The interior floors and walls, however, were made from plaster and timber. Aging tin roofs allowed water to seep in, resulting in decay. In many places the floors were in a state of dangerous deterioration, in others they had rotted out completely leaving the houses as cavernous shells. Regan had no idea why anyone would have an issue with getting rid of these cesspits and building something modern in its place. He took his time making his way to the top of the stairs. A broken neck the last thing he needed.

Upstairs he could hear a scratching sound and whispering voices from the front of the house. He emerged from the gloom of the stairwell and stepped into the front bedroom. Sun streamed through unglazed windows and it took his eyes a few moments to adjust to the glare.

The room was bare, the house's furniture having long been removed by the departing residents or taken and destroyed by Elias and his men. The ceiling of the room had disintegrated and Regan could see up into the roof cavity. Pinpricks of light from rust holes in the roofing iron shone through in thin beams and he could hear the caw and flutter of pigeons roosting out of sight on the rafters.

In the corner of the room sat two small children. A boy of eight or nine and a girl, maybe five. Both had matted blond hair grown out to shoulder length. The boy was only wearing a pair of football shorts that were several sizes too large. His bare chest was grimy and his pale skin carried a greyish hue. His bony ribcage and shoulders pushed through his skin. The girl was not as grubby but was just as skinny. Her skin tone bore a puce tinge. She wore a sun frock with a floral design. It was torn at the shoulder.

The children were playing a game with a collection of empty cigarette packets. They stopped and stared silently at Regan.

He crouched down and flashed a smile at them. 'Whatcha playing?'

The little girl looked shyly towards her brother. He kept his gaze locked onto the floor in front of him but spoke in a strong voice. 'We're building towers'.

So are we Regan thought, smiling inwardly.

'How tall have you got?'

The boy shrugged 'Dunno. Don't count so good.'

'Well let's see what we can do then' Regan said, stepping in closer and lifting one of the cigarette boxes onto its neighbour.

'You lived here long?'

The boy shook his head, 'Nup, not long.' He lifted a cigarette pack and placed it carefully on top of the pile. 'We never stay anywhere long.'

'That your mum and dad downstairs?'

'Yep.'

Poor bastards. He reckoned kids like this were better off without parents. Given the state of those two downstairs he guessed they were pretty much on their own anyway.

Regan's own parents had been killed in a car crash when he and his brother were not much older than the little boy that sat before him. Aged eleven they were enrolled in a boarding school for orphans. It was the first real home that Regan had ever known.

Until that point they had gone from town to town as his mother and father had sought out whatever seasonal work they could find. They moved from a cheap rental unit in one place to a worker's boarding house in the next. Occasionally the boys would go to school but before long they would up-sticks and move again due to their father having either lost his job or been run out of town by the locals having been pegged as a drunkard, layabout and occasional thief.

Like the couple downstairs, Regan's parent's downfall was booze. They only worked to provide the funds for their next drinking session. Sometimes that meant disappearing for hours to the local pub. But more often than not they drank at home. Regan could

remember those raucous days and nights clearly. Strangers filled the house. New acquaintances whose love of the bottle had brought them together. The mood would swing from celebration to aggression to melancholy.

Regan looked at the gaunt faces of the children and remembered the hunger that he and his brother had known. A hunger that made you feel crazy. Almost worse was the knowledge that in the next room two people that were supposed to care for them were drinking away their next meal.

After a while he and his brother had learned to stockpile food when they could, hiding it away from their parents and eating it sparingly. They were human squirrels. As he grew in age and audaciousness, Regan would creep out into the midst of the parties to steal money. He scooped up loose change left on tables from gambling and rifled through jackets and handbags. None of the adults would be any the wiser about their lost money, though once he was caught removing a wallet from a jacket he found lying over the back of a chair. The owner kicked up and Regan froze like a possum in the headlights, feet bolted solid to the spot. Then a joke was made and the collective laughter had dampened the man's fury. He sent Regan on his way with only a kick up the bum for his troubles.

Regan looked down at the two kids. Their putrid clothes, their dirty faces. Their wretched game played with rubbish picked up off the streets.

The children were looking at Regan, and he was surprised to see fear in their eyes. He looked down at the cigarette packet he was holding and saw it crushed and twisted between his clenched fists.

He dropped the box to the ground and stood.

'My friend Elias is going to take you somewhere nice to stay tonight and get you some hot food'

He left the room without looking back.

Downstairs Regan found the woman curled into a ball in the corner of the room. The man was pinned by his throat against the wall. Elias, seeing Regan enter the room, paused giving the man an opportunity to begin incoherently pleading his case to Regan.

Ignoring the man's mumbling Regan leaned in to Elias's ear.

'Organise one of your guys to take these people to a motel. Somewhere on the outskirts of town. Make it hard for them to turn up back here.'

He reached into his pocket, removed a shiny silver money clip, counted out banknotes and stuffed them into Elias' pocket.

'Pay for a room, and make sure the two kids upstairs get a decent meal.'

Despite his predicament, the father brightened at the sight of money and was suddenly able to speak coherently.

'If it makes it easier I could take the money and see to the children's needs myself' his voice a strangled wheeze.

Regan spun around and sunk his fist hard into the man's stomach, forcing the wind out of him with a groan. The man gave a low groan but with Elias' hand round his neck,

pinning him to the wall he was unable to fold over, instead bringing his knees up to protect against a second punch. Then the effort got too much and he allowed his body to go limp.

Regan nodded to Elias then walked calmly from the house.

After a few minutes Elias began bundling the family into a waiting car. Regan lit a cigarette and watched as first he carried out the man, draped in a lifeless heap over his shoulder. He re-emerged with the woman, still curled into a ball and now cradled in Elias's arms like a baby. Finally he led the children out of the house, holding one of their hands in each of his giant paws. The young girl's head hung down, her gaze blinkered straight ahead. The boy looked up and around as if searching for something. His eyes fell on Regan and remained there. Regan held the stare then looked away. He didn't look back until he heard the car doors slam. He could make out the matted blond locks of the boy through the back window as the car drove away.

Elias spoke to the other thugs and they drifted away looking disappointed. Pat McGowan had remained on the scene and scrutinised proceedings closely. He appeared somewhat concerned at the evictee couple's inability to walk, but seemed to put this down to their intoxication, for as soon as they departed he wandered back to the demolition site. Shortly Regan heard the big crane fire up, ready to swing its wrecking ball through the now vacant home. He gestured to Elias that it was time to leave.

Regan drove whilst Elias sat silently in the passenger seat. The two men had been working together for over three years but rarely engaged in chit-chat. At first Regan

thought that Elias didn't like him; that he bore some grudge against the younger man who so quickly progressed from errand boy to a position of authority in Frank Sheldon's organisation. But he soon realised that Elias responded to everyone with the same stony face. Regan assumed he had come to the same conclusion that Frank Sheldon had, namely that the complex dynamics of the property game required more than just mere brawn. Men like Elias could be left to their own devices when collecting a debt or running security, but were out of their depth when it came to dealing with the Police and Council, touchy residents and neighbours, unions and protest groups. Regan was sure, for instance, that Elias would not have been able to resolve the standoff with Pat McGowan today without his intervention. Regan was, he liked to think, the carrot, Elias the stick.

They became stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic along William Street, crawling past low rent office buildings, cheap hotels and car-rental depots. At walking pace they edged slowly up hill to the lights at College Street which appeared to be short-phasing.

Regan looked out to his right into an inner city park. It was a little more than a vacant lot, with a handful of straggly trees and shrubs. A few sparse islands of grass sat amongst a sea of dusty cracked earth. A small girl played in the dirt. Regan watched her twirl around like a ballerina, the dust kicking at her heels.

He was still watching the girl when suddenly the bright sunlight of the day began to fade.

Regan craned his head out the window to see what was happening only to be pulled back inside the car by Elias.

'Eclipse' he said in his heavily accented English. 'Newspaper say you no look at it'.

The traffic surged forward briefly.

'You look at it, you go blind' Elias added.

'Yep I know' Regan said. 'I looked at one once. Lost my vision for three days. Doctor couldn't tell me whether I'd ever see again when it happened' he trailed off.

Elias grunted.

'A pinhole camera' Regan muttered, eliciting another grunt from Elias. 'It's the only way you can safely look at the eclipse. A pinhole camera.'

Regan remembered the little girl in the park. He craned his head back over his shoulder. What if she didn't know about the eclipse, about the damage it could cause? But they had moved on too far and he could no longer see her.

Behind him a car horn tooted and Regan looked testily up into the rear view mirror.

'Boss the traffic move'

Regan opened his eyes to see Elias looking at him with a quizzical, concerned stare.

The cars that had clogged the road were now streaming up the hill.

Pushing the car into gear he accelerated away. Slowly the sun returned.

Three

The old wharf at the sugar mill had fallen into disrepair. Both the cane coming in and the refined sugar going out were carried by truck now, rather than barges like in the old days. At one end the supporting timbers of the wharf had given way and it sagged into the river in a series of rollercoaster dips. Connor ate his lunch each day at the tip of opposite end, where despite a few rotten planks to navigate it felt relatively solid.

Occasionally one of his fellow workers would abandon the smoky confines of the lunchroom to join him, but today, like most days, he ate alone. Only his regular lunch date, a motley grey seagull arrived on cue to keep him company and covet his bread crusts.

Connor unzipped his overalls and folded them down to the waist. His skin felt hot and sticky, coated with a mixture of cane juice and his own sweat. A thousand tiny cuts from the sharp edges of the sugarcane stung the length of his arms. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his overalls and took a seat on a raised column that marker the edge of the wharf.

Most days Connor would let his legs dangle over the side and gaze out at the river, at the tablelands and mountains beyond it. But today he looked back at the mill. Its single smoke stack towered over a bird's nest of steel tubing that seemed to twist endlessly back on itself.

As kids they passed the sugar mill many times and wondered what it would be like to work inside. The air around the mill smelled sweet. It reminded Connor of school fairs. Candy floss and toffee apples. He would see the men arriving and departing from their shifts, wearing the same blue overalls as he wore now. Their faces blank, numbed by ten hour shifts pushing half tonne bins, stuffing hoppers, clearing blockages on the line.

When he and his classmates finished up their final year, they all talked about doing something special, leaving Broken River for Sydney, Brisbane or beyond. But talk was cheap and at least half of them ended up right here at the mill. Even then they persisted with the same bullshit, saying they wouldn't be there for long, that next year they'd have enough saved to throw the boards on the car and head north chasing waves. An endless summer, just like the movie.

Maybe that was why Connor came out to the wharf each day to eat his lunch. Tired of hearing their fantasies and too tired, too honest with himself to put out any of this own. He had a wife and kid at home. Even after a couple of good week's overtime they barely had enough for the basics, a few beers on Thursday night.

The sound of footsteps caught his attention and he looked to see Steve, his best mate from school, approaching.

'Shit Connor, the boys are starting to think you don't like em, that they smell or something'

'They do smell'

'Yeah well so do you. Wanna take a bath?'

Steve jumped forward and pretended to push Connor into the water before dragging him back upright with a handful of his shirt.

'Tell ya mum I saved ya' said Steve.

'My mum's dead'

'Oh well tell my mum, save me talking to her.'

Connor smiled.

'Anyways' Steve continued, 'why don't you come up and join the smelly working class heroes of Broken River? There's a game a two-up on.'

'You know my luck'

'Well your luck can change Connor. Besides, you got me for a mate, how flamin' lucky is that?' Steve gave him a friendly slap on the back.

Connor took a final bite of his sandwich then through the crust to the old seagull, who caught it in mid flight and swallowed it whole.

'You ever reckon we'll get out a here mate?' he asked.

'Yep, five o'clock on the dot every night.'

'You know what I mean.'

Steve shrugged. 'It's alright for now I guess. Puts some money in my pocket, keeps me off the streets. You know.'

'So what's next?'

'Well' Steve hesitated. 'Don't say anything, but I decided to join up. Gonna shoot into Grafton tomorrow, put my name on the list'

'What, the army?'

'No the Sisters of bloody Mercy. Of course the army.'

'But won't they ship you off to Vietnam?'

'Yeah probably. But how bad can it be?'

Connor shot his friend an incredulous look. 'Getting shot at bad. Getting killed bad. That's how bad.'

'From what they say its winding down over there. The Commies are on the back foot.'

'Don't believe the shit you read in the papers.'

'Well anyways, the conscription lottery is on again this Sunday. You might be going yourself.'

'Yeah, that'd be just my luck.'

Steve gave him a punch on the arm.

'Stop all this bullshit about bad luck.' He reached into his pocket and took out a coin.

'Look here's a bright new fifty cent coin. It's yours to win or lose in the two-up circle.

But I say you'll win. Then if you can give me my money back!'

'And if I lose?'

'You can't lose mate. You still have me as you buddy. And that makes you a winner always.'

Connor smiled and took the hand that Steve offered him, lifting him to his feet.

Together they walked back to join the group of men playing two-up.

Four

Frank Sheldon gazed out the window of his tenth story office suite.

The panorama stretched from the Harbour Bridge all the way to the Heads. In the foreground the green open spaces of Hyde Park, the Domain and Botanic Gardens. The historic spire of the Cathedral and the walls of Hyde Park Barracks contrasted with the modern office towers that ran along Macquarie Street. The white tips of the Sydney Opera House roof poked out from behind concrete and mirror glass.

He never tired looking at this view. It reminded him just how far he had come. Two decades earlier Frank Sheldon, then Frankie Smith, had struggled to keep his head above water in the cesspool of post-war London. When the war ended he was aged thirteen. He would later say his father was killed fighting for his country. In truth he was incarcerated in Wandsworth Prison in 1941 on a fifteen year lag for the large scale forgery of ration coupons. Two years into his sentence he was found in his cell with a crushed skull. Soon after his father's death Frankie began working in the family's criminal enterprise, now run by his two uncles. He worked as a runner ferrying bundles of ration books and cash back and forth supporting the street level dealers who plied their trade from pubs and markets.

It was widely thought that rationing would end soon after armistice, but the program intensified, and soon included everyday items such as bread and potatoes. The family business continued to profit through the business of forged ration cards, then diversified to provide many goods unavailable in the post war economy. Soon Frankie

spent his days running around London's inner west in a Hillman Husky delivering home-stilled whiskey, gin and imported wine to the back doors of pubs, stolen and untaxed cigarettes to corner stores, and high end consumer goods such as radios and linen to whoever could afford it.

Unfortunately the growing scale of their operations brought unwelcome attention, not from the law, but from rival operators. Frankie parked the empty Husky outside the warehouse late one summer's afternoon. He passed four men wearing three-piece suits walking from the building. At the time he had thought their attire unusual, given the heat wave that had much of England in its grip. Once inside he found the bodies of his two uncles sprawled on the floor of the warehouse, lying in pools of blood flowing from their stab wounds.

It was the last day Frankie was to spend in London, a city he had lived his entire life. Without pausing to shed a tear for his butchered uncles he walked to the basement, past the printing presses and removed from inside the old boiler stacks upon stacks of banknotes that represented the accumulated wealth of the family enterprise. It wasn't until he arrived in Sydney one week later that he counted the money, smuggled into the country in the lining of his jacket. It was fifteen thousand pounds. A small fortune.

An hour long visit to the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Macquarie Street was all that was needed to change his name. He didn't think it likely anyone would come looking for him but didn't want to leave anything to chance. Frankie Smith had remained in London and Frank Sheldon was reborn in Sydney.

After the violence of his life in London, he saw the opportunity to start afresh as a legitimate businessman. However as he grew from small property acquisitions and developments to larger ones, he realised he still needed to play the game. Unions, police, the Council all put their hand out for a slice, and Frank Sheldon paid.

But whilst he had people roughed up, the image of his slain uncles stayed with him and he vowed that business, money, was not worth a life.

It was a vow he had kept.

Regan pulled the car to a stop on the street outside the office tower that was home to Sheldon Investments.

Stepping through the heavy glass entrance doors that Elias held open, Regan suppressed a shiver as the gleam of sweat he wore from the day's exertions was chilled in the air-conditioned interior. They walked across through the marble floored lobby past the front desk to wait for a lift to take them to the tenth floor.

Inside the elevator a hidden loudspeaker piped a xylophone version of *Amazing Grace*. Regan checked his appearance in the polished steel of the lift doors. He ran his hands from his temple through to the base of his skull in quick scything movements. His hair was naturally wiry and if neglected looked like a steelo pad, or worse, like one of those Jackson Five kids who for some strange reason were popular in the charts. He used a shitload of pomade each day to keep his hair slicked back, but even then clumps of it would tuft up as the day wore on.

Once satisfied with the front and sides, he pinched and twisted the few wispy strands that he allowed to protrude from behind his ears and across the back of his neck, teasing them with his fingers into frayed curls. Taking a handkerchief he wiped his hands clean of the sticky pomade.

Finally, licking the tips of his thumb and pinkie finger he smoothed down his eyebrows from the centre to the sides in one swift motion.

Hi glanced up to see Elias in the dull reflection of steel doors suppressing a grin.

‘What the fuck are you looking at?’

Elias feigned a cough, covered his mouth with his hand and looked away.

The elevator slowed, a chime sounded, and the lift doors opened.

When Regan had first stepped through these doors as a seventeen year old and fresh from Broken River he was already suitably impressed having taken his first ride in an elevator. He didn't think he could ever have imagined a place so opulent. The carpet was half an inch in depth and ran wall to wall and all the way to the lift's doors. The reception area was centred on a vast black lacquered reception desk with a shiny chrome top. Matching chrome letters spaced across its front proclaimed 'Sheldon Investments'.

Along one wall of the foyer were four black leather chairs positioned around a low coffee table made out of a single sheet of curved glass. A pile of oversized books on architecture balanced neatly in its middle. Elias sauntered off to sit on one of the seats.

He always appeared happy to sit and wait until Regan returned with their instructions, never entering the main office.

Regan peeled off to the right, walking past four ceramic columns of varying heights, their tops cut off on the diagonal. Across and through these columns were twisted lengths of multi-coloured steel tubing and folded squares of similarly coloured wire mesh. This was supposed to be a sculpture, purchased from some ponsy European artist. It cost Sheldon ten thousand dollars. Regan rarely questioned his boss's judgement, but in this case felt reckoned he and Elias could have carted some rumble from one of Sheldon's demolition sites and made an arrangement of no less artistic merit for a much smaller outlay.

As Regan approached the heavy double doors leading to the office proper a movement from behind the receptionist desk caught his attention. Over its top appeared a shock of peroxide blond hair.

'G'day Sheryl' said Regan cheerfully.

Two heavily mascaraed eyes and a set of lips sporting bright pink lipstick peered from under the nest of blonde curls. Sheryl was a divorcee in her forties, who liked to wear low cut tops and miniskirts that Regan reckoned would have looked better on a woman half her age. *Mutton dressed as lamb* was an expression he remembered hearing once and he considered it apt. Still, he would often take the time to stand at the reception desk and give Sheryl a little cheek, leaning over to cop an eyeful of cleavage. Today however he continued on without delay. He wouldn't waste time flirting until he understood if there were any jobs that Mister Sheldon needed done.

'Oh hello Regan, love' Sheryl replied with the beginnings of a smile on her face, then promptly burst into tears.

Regan stopped dead. He turned to look back at Elias who shrugged with palms upturned.

Regan's stood staring, captivated by the streams of tears black with mascara that ran down Sheryl's face.

'I'm so sorry love, so sorry' she blubbered.

Regan shook his head in wonder, then turned and pushed through the heavy double doors. They swung silently closed behind him, leaving Sheryl to her tears.

The inner office was open-plan, with a half dozen desks spaced across an area much larger than needed. Frank Sheldon had the only separate office which was enclosed behind a partition wall and occupied one quarter of the floor.

Regan saw the stooped figure of William James sitting at the desk immediately outside of this enclave. James was a weasel-like man in his fifties with thinning grey hair greasily slicked back from his forehead. He stood and beckoned to him with an outstretched arm. Regan noted that the James' cold blue eyes were the only ones in the room to meet and hold his gaze.

He said nothing as Regan approached and wrapped his outstretched arm around Regan's shoulder. Taking him in a crane-like grip he led him to the open door of Sheldon's office. Pausing at the entrance, William James cleared his throat to announce their presence.

'Come in Regan my son' sounded the gravelly voice from the far reaches of the office.

The room was dim. The windows were tinted with a smokey brown film which filtered out much of the natural light. Frank Sheldon was seated at a desk against the far wall, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

'Come on Regan. Come sit over on the couch.'

Sheldon stood. He was by any standard a huge man. His eyes were sunken behind red fleshy cheeks and a jowly chin hung under his jaw line as if taking a scenic route to his neck. Below the shoulders Sheldon's girth truly exploded, his torso spreading out rapidly on an angle more horizontal than vertical. Protruding from under this mass of flesh were two absurdly skinny legs, their ability to support his weight in defiance of the laws of science, Regan reckoned. These legs now carried Sheldon across the room, his movement a penguin-like waddle, his breath coming in laboured puffs.

William James steered Regan onto one of the couches, positioning himself alongside. The upholstery was plush but Regan did not sit back. Frank Sheldon's heavy footsteps approached from behind. When it became apparent that Sheldon too would sit on the same settee, Regan slid himself awkwardly along the seat to make room. With William James positioned to his left and Frank Sheldon on his right, Regan felt mildly claustrophobic and stared straight ahead rather than turning to look at either man, blinkered like a racehorse. Sheldon's distinct odour filled Regan's nostrils, musky cologne masking the smell of tobacco and stale sweat.

A podgy hand shot out and grasped Regan's leg making him jump. He looked down at the short sausage-like fingers, his vision drawn to the oversize emerald ring Sheldon

wore on his pinky finger. A mat of blond hair covered his hand, forming up into springy tufts on the crest of each knuckle. The flash of a gold cufflink hung below the hem of the sleeve of Sheldon's navy blue jacket.

Regan slowly turned, meeting Sheldon's solemn stare.

'I'm afraid, Regan my son, that I have some bad news for you.

Five

The sound of laughter drifts on the night wind. Cackles echo high and hedonistically.

She too is laughing, but is not sure why. She stumbles and almost trips, her heels a menace in the sand. He rounds swiftly in behind her, the urgency of a farm dog at muster. He is afraid that if she falls he won't get her going again. He knows they are still within earshot of the others.

He is laughing, but it is different. As if intending only to reassure, as one would a child with a lullaby. He has his hands upon her. One on her shoulder. One on the small of her back. When her laughter dies away his sounds hollow and false. He hears it too and allows the last of it to taper away, leaving them in the false silence of the wind whistling off the ocean, the sound a distant siren.

She asks if they are heading back to join the party, her slurred voice unfamiliar to her, as if it belongs to someone else. *Yes, he insists, I am taking you to a party. Just the two of us.*

The grip on her shoulder tightens as he herds her on. She says she wants to go back.

He says nothing in response.

She thrashes, twisting away from his grip. She takes one stride then a second before she falls. Face first into the sand, wet and cold on her skin. She raises her head and tries to brush the sand away from her face. She can taste the coarseness of the grains that have become stuck on her lipstick and the tip of her tongue.

She turns over but the effort makes her dizzy and she stops to breathe before she can try to find her feet. At the centre of her vision is the moon. Full and bright. The night sky so clear she can make out the scars and bruises on its cratered surface.

Another circle moves across her vision, black over white. The moon is progressively obscured, the lunar cycle running in fast forward. Its image remains imprinted on her eyes. It takes a moment before she accepts that it is gone.

She feels pressure pinning her shoulders, then her legs and thighs.

The sand is cold, creeping. The summer frock she borrowed without permission from her mother's wardrobe offers little warmth. She will be in trouble if she returns it torn. She cranes to see the moon again but it doesn't reappear. The sand dunes envelop her grain by grain. Each time she writhes she allows the sand to climb further up her like water seeping into a stricken boat.

She realises that soon the sand will consume her. Instead of fearing it she welcomes it. She realises that once it covers her she will no longer feel his breath upon her. Sour. Wanting.

The sand covers her legs, then her arms. It pours into the depressions in her hips and the hollows of her shoulders. It fills her ears, her nose, her mouth. It fills her throat and muffles the sound of her crying.

Her eyes are the last to slip beneath the sand. She realises she won't see the moon again. But then it returns. A pinprick of light in the darkness, guiding her, steady and dependable.

The windows of the old villa had no curtains. The moonlight flooded in bathing Rose in a ghostly light.

The phone was ringing.

She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Ten o'clock. Her ankles and knees were numb from being folded underneath her, hampering her efforts to reach the phone before it rang off.

The bakelite phone bolted to the wall of the hallway was as old as the house. Its bell was failing and emitted an emphysemic rattle that resembled the cry of a cane toad. Around its edges the wallpaper retained its original colour and bright pattern but elsewhere was faded and peeling at its edges. Along the skirting boards it was grubby from generations of children and pets. High above Rose's head the architraves were freckled black with the excreta of flies.

Rose lifted the heavy handset to her ear. Down the line she could hear the unmistakable soundtrack of a pub. There was music playing. The rattle of glasses over

the steady murmur of male voices. Splinters of drunken laughter. The clatter of pool balls.

'Please tell me you haven't drunk all your pay?' Rose closed her eyes, wincing at the bitterness in her voice. *It's not for me*, she told herself, *but for Lucinda*.

'You really should answer the phone more polite.'

'Conner?' she asked, but by the time her mouth had formed the question she already knew the answer.

'You having problems at home sweetheart?' he said, followed by a derisive snort. 'I told you Rose, you married the wrong brother.'

'Connor's not home' she said quietly, 'call back.'

Her grip tightened on the handset, but resisted the urge to slam it down into the receiver.

'What makes you think it was Connor I was ringing for. Maybe I wanted to have a chat with you?'

For a moment Rose wonders if she is still dreaming, if her sleeping mind is melding the past with the present.

From the next room she hears the gurgling sound of Lucinda waking.

'I have to go, the baby's crying.'

The line goes silent for a moment.

'What did you have?' he asks.

She hesitates.

'A girl. Lucinda'.

The voice seems to have lost some of its swagger.

'Nice name. Give her a kiss from her Uncle Regan.'

She hears clicks on the line.

'Money's running out,' he says, 'I'd better go. Tell Conner that his grandmother's dead. Funeral's this Saturday.'

Rose stood holding the phone against her ear listening to the bleeps that pulsed down the line. Finally she replaced the handset, the old phone responding with a single pip before falling silent.

From the next room she could hear Lucinda crying. She moved down the hallway, passing the open door of the main bedroom where a crib was set up in one corner. She paused for a moment, then covered her ears and continued down the hall to the kitchen.

'I'm sorry' she mouthed.

From the pantry she took a bottle of cooking sherry. She stood at the sink and poured herself a measure. It was sticky and clung to the sides of the glass like treacle. She drank it down in one shot, the liquid sweet and strong. The vapour swirled from her

throat up into her mouth and nostrils. She coughed once then poured another glass.

After a third measure she began as if she could breathe again.

She finished her fourth as she heard the scrunch of gravel on the driveway. Through the window she saw a strobe of headlights flash across the lawn in front of the barn.

The car's engine revved as it slipped out of gear then settled into a low idle.

She could hear men's voices speaking in penitent whispers. Mischievous laughter erupted but was simultaneously shushed. A car door slammed and the engine revved.

As the car departed its taillights filled the yard with a red glow.

When she heard his footfall on the back step Rose was jolted into motion. She tipped the remaining sherry from her glass down the sink and turned to the pot-belly stove on which his dinner was sitting. Removing the foil cover she saw the spaghetti that had been cooked several hours ago was dry and brittle. The tomato sauce had vanished like the tide, leaving the cockles high and dry, shrivelled to a fraction of their earlier size.

Just inside the back door were two mismatched chairs and a rickety table on which she'd laid a knife and fork. She picked up the bowl and was halfway across the room when she saw the sherry bottle, its lid discarded accusatorily alongside it, sitting in plain sight. She stopped in the centre of the kitchen, paralysed with indecision, the effects of the sherry making her thoughts sluggish.

It was only then that she registered the heat from the bowl was burning her hands. With a muffled shriek she let go and could only watch as the bowl seemed to float for an instant before plummeting onto the floor. The tomato sauce she thought had

evaporated to nothing now re-emerged to explode across the floor. In its condensed form it was a darker hue, thick and glutinous like congealed blood.

Connor opened the door and stepped inside. He was dressed as he had left the house that morning, only now his overalls were unzipped to the waist, and his face carried the grime of a day's work. She could smell sweat and sugar. Beer and cigarette smoke.

He made to speak, a greeting or apology for his lateness. But upon taking in the disarray that greeted him his mouth flapped open in surprise. He saw the bowl smashed on the floor, lengths of spaghetti, sauce and cockles radiating out from it like a child's drawing of the sun. He looked up to Rose who averted her gaze to a point just above the skirting board where a single strand of spaghetti was making its way down to the floor, turning over on itself like an acrobat.

She looked back to see his eyes had fallen on the cooking sherry, and this time when he looked back to her she held his gaze, sure that her eyes were bloodshot and moist.

'Are you going to go to her?' he asked.

Rose looked blankly back, her head dipping to one side as she strained to understand.

'Lucinda' he said in a clear, loud voice as if speaking to a child.

Like a loudspeaker turned on, the sound of Lucinda's cries re-entered Rose's consciousness, sounding raspy and distressed. Rose sprang forward through the mess on the floor, feeling the spilled food squelching beneath her slippers.

Conner remained glued to the spot with a look of disbelief on his face as she rushed past him into the hallway.

She fingered the needlework of the shawl wrapped around Lucinda. It was knitted by her grandmother. Rose was wrapped in it when she was a baby. She lowered Lucinda into her crib and folded a quilt over her. Lucinda gurgled once, her eyes tensing together before her face unravelled and her descent into sleep was complete.

She went to the bathroom and splashed water her face before returned to the kitchen. She found Connor on all fours, making a half-hearted effort to clean up the mess of food off the floor. The tea-towel he was using had spread the tomato sauce into an oily smear on the linoleum.

'Leave it. I'll do it' Rose said, her voice curt.

Connor rose to his feet stiffly. Since his school years he had become broader and somewhat stocky,. The effects of manual labour and a healthy appetite for food and more recently beer.

He picked up the sherry bottle from the sink.

'I thought this was for cooking.'

'I thought your wages were to look after this family.'

His nostrils flared.

'I come home to find a crying baby in one room, and mum getting smashed on cheap sherry in the other. And then she lectures me about looking after the bloody family.'

Rose looked at her toes, her face flushed with indignation and shame. She said nothing for a long moment.

As Connor made to leave the room she spoke.

'Your brother rang.'

Connor stopped. 'What did you say?'

'I said your brother rang'

Connor looked down at the sherry bottle in his hand as if it would corroborate Rose's story.

'Regan rang? Here?'

Rose nodded.

'What the bloody hell did he want?'

Rose looked up at him. She hadn't meant to tell him like this.

'It's your grandmother. Hilda. She's passed away. Dead. The funeral is this Saturday.'

Connor nodded, then turned and left the room.

Six

Connor stuffed two clean shirts, underwear and a toothbrush into a canvas hold-all then looked down at it and frowned. Despite having finished packing the bag still looked empty and he wondered for a moment whether he should find some other stuff to bring. After gazing for a moment in the direction of the chest of drawers he couldn't think what else he would need. He zipped the bag closed.

Connor wasn't used to travelling, much less to dressing in a suit. The one he wore now belonged to his father. When he tried it on before work yesterday he found it fitted pretty well. It was a little long in the leg and felt tight across the shoulders and waist, but it would do, so long as he didn't try and wave his hands around. Connor didn't expect there was much call for hand waving at funerals.

He turned and looked into the mirror. Its reflective backing had long ago begun blackening and flaking away from the edges and had now disintegrated to the point where the image reflected back was criss-crossed with a web of black lines.

He was quietly impressed with what he saw. Clean-shaven and with his unruly mop of sandy-brown hair washed and combed he looked respectable, if not downright handsome. He reckoned he wouldn't look out of place working at a bank, or down the council office. He stood a little taller and tightened his face into a serious expression.

'G'day' he began, then corrected himself. '*Good morning* sir, and how can we help you today at the Bank of New South Wales?' he said, holding his arm stiffly and shaking

hands with the air. Maybe he would apply for something like that when he got back.

He was buggered if he was going to spend the next twenty years at the mill.

The smell of frying eggs reached him from the kitchen making his stomach murmur. He lifted his eyebrows in surprise, leaned into the mirror and winked at himself.

'Looks like you'll get fed this morning, you well dressed bastard you.'

There had been no breakfast for him yesterday. Rose got up early as usual to give Lucinda her first morning feed. But then, instead of staying up and rummaging around on her morning chores she returned to slip silently back under the sheets. She occupied a slither of the bed as far away from Connor as she could get. When he got up an hour later she lay dead still, even though Connor could see a flicker behind her eyelids. But he said nothing and dressed for work. It was only after his attempt at porridge had turned into a gluey mess that he had felt a little cross with the situation.

She knew Wednesday was pay-day and the boys went to the pub after work. And with his best mate Steve signing up for the army and probably off to Vietnam, there was every reason to stay for a couple more than usual. Having no car he was reliant on Steve for a lift home and of course Steve was in no hurry. Connor wasn't either, but that was beside the point. And when he had come home to find the baby screaming, food flung all over the place and her swigging away from the cooking sherry, well Christ, what's a man to think?

He couldn't help feeling it had something to do with Regan's phone call. Maybe his brother had said something to stir her up? It wouldn't surprise him. Something odd had gone on between those two.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. Rose's head popped around the edge of the doorframe.

'Your breakfast's ready' she said with a breezy smile.

Connor smiled back. *Women, impossible to figure out they were.*

'Grouse. I'm starving'

Rose smiled and made to return to the kitchen, but then changed tack and crossed the room to stand in between him and the mirror. She stood on tiptoes so that her face moved across his reflection.

'I don't often catch you looking in the mirror' Rose said, smoothing down the lapels of his jacket.

'I don't often wear a suit'

'You look different'

He grinned. 'Good different or bad different?'

She thought for a moment. 'Neither. Just different. Like you're someone else.'

Her eyes were still looking at him but after a moment Connor realised they had glassed over and her thoughts were elsewhere. She frowned and her hands fall away.

'Come eat your breakfast before it gets cold' she said, and turning sharply on her heels was gone, leaving Connor's face staring back at him from the mirror once more.

He shrugged, then smoothed a hand over his hair and glanced at his reflection one more time before leaving the room.

Connor sat at the small table eating while Rose stood with her back to him, washing dishes.

'Where will you stay in Sydney?' she asked.

'With Regan' Connor answered through a mouthful of food. 'Rung him from work yesterday, said I can crash on his couch.'

Rose turned away from the sink. 'Why don't you just get a hotel room? You're only there three nights.'

Soapy water dripped from her hands onto the kitchen floor.

'Hang on, aren't you the one who is always saying how we should save money?'

Rose turned back to the dishes.

'I didn't think you and him got on.'

Connor swept the last piece of bread around his plate, wiping up any remaining traces of egg, then stood and walked to the sink with his plate.

'Why would I have a problem with Regan?'

She snatched the plate and dumped it in the sink. His last mouthful of bread was left uneaten and it floated to the top and bobbed amongst the suds.

'Well let's just think about this, shall we? Why would you have a problem with Regan?'

She paused and Connor wasn't sure if she was expecting him to answer when she continued. 'Maybe it could be that he told them it was you that destroyed that statue and tried to get you expelled from school? He's a liar and he's... he's violent, and...'

'Calm down Rose, for goodness sake.' Conner reached out, grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. 'He's my brother, I know who he is. And yes he does have a touch of the mongrel about him...'

'Touch of the mongrel? He's evil.'

A car horn tooted outside.

'That's Steve, I'd better go.'

To Connor's surprise Rose wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. His arms fell from her shoulders down across her back and before he knew it he was hugging her tightly. She seemed so small nestled into him like this, fragile and childlike. Her hair was soft and clean and he lowered his head into it, breathing in her scent.

'It'll be ok,' he said finally. 'I'll be back Sunday night.'

The horn sounded again.

'I'd better go.'

She seemed reluctant to let go, pulling him tighter into her before finally breaking the embrace.

'Be safe, ok?' she said and leaned up on to her toes to kiss him on the lips before turning back to the sink.

Connor walked through to the bedroom to pick up his bag and give Lucinda a tickle and a kiss goodbye. When he returned to the kitchen, Rose stood with her back to him, her hands sitting in the dishwater.

'See you love' he said.

She didn't turn around.

'Bye' she replied softly.

The railway didn't run through Broken River, its route staying clear of the coast with its inlets and wide river mouths, sticking instead to the inland towns with their agriculture and industry.

On a normal day Connor would have struggled to find a ride to the station in Grafton, some thirty odd miles away. It was bloody lucky, all things considered, that Steve had finished up at the mill earlier the previous day.

As expected Steve had ribbed him about his suit, telling him he looked like a ponce.

'I knew you were going to a funeral, but I never realised you were the flamin' undertaker' he said.

'You're just jealous. Pretty soon the only thing you'll be wearing will be khaki.'

The countryside floated by. Old letterboxes made from tin poked out into the roadway, some with flags up for the postie to call. Lines of gum trees divided paddocks. Endless fields of sugarcane moved with the wind. Connor wondered what the land would look like in Vietnam.

'When do you get back from Sydney?' Steve asked.

'Sunday. When do you leave for the army?'

'Saturday.'

'Might not see you for a bit then?'

'Guess not. Supposed to be two years we're gone, but training's the first few months of that. We get home leave after nine month active.'

'Won't see you for a year then.'

'Nah, not unless I get shot up and they ship me home early' Steve gave a nervous laugh.

'You'll miss the footy season'

'Yeah I know. Didn't think about that. Gutted.'

'Wonder what it'll be like up there?'

Steve shrugged. 'Dunno. Not I s'pose. My cousin told me he'd heard the beer was cheap and the girls even cheaper.' They both laughed.

'Well it's got to beat working at the mill.'

'Pay's better at least.'

They sat in silence until they reached the outskirts of Grafton.

'So you reckon you'd go if you got called up?' Steve asked.

'Don't think you have a lot of choice, do you?'

'S'pose not. You could always bugger off to New Zealand for a bit.'

Connor laughed. 'New Zealand? What the hell I am gonna do in New Zealand?'

Steve gave him a friendly push 'Do they have sugarcane there? You could get a job in a mill, same as here. Wait it out.'

Connor thought for a minute, then spoke in a more serious tone. 'Nah. You got to do your bit, don't you? None of us been brought up to run away from a fight.'

Steve nodded. 'Yeah that's true. Only it ain't just a rugby stoush or a pub brawl.'

Steve pulled to a stop outside the station. Goodbyes, Conner reckoned, were always difficult, but more so when it was two blokes. But when Steve got out of the car and walked round to the passenger side the two men embraced and it didn't feel uncomfortable.

'You look after yourself mate' Connor said into the back of Steve's head, and thumped him twice on the back.

'Thanks mate, you too. Who knows, might see you up there.'

Connor felt a gentle shunt back into his seat as the train began rolling away from Grafton station. The seat's leather was polished hard with use and had begun to crack in places. Connor ran his hands over it, letting the brittle ridges scratch against his palms. He looked out the grimy window. The stationhouse slowly disappeared from his side view. The train gathered speed and when the platform fell away from beside them the sensation was like running off a wharf. Soon the town was turned into a blur of red brick, grey corrugated iron and gum trees.

Sliding back into his seat Connor felt the rolling motion of the train gently move him from side to side. The scenery passing by outside the carriage was too familiar to hold any interest, and he closed his eyes, letting his thoughts drift.

Yesterday his boss let him use the phone in the office of the mill to speak with Regan, but he had to keep it brief. From what Connor could understand Hilda had dropped dead at her local RSL on Wednesday afternoon.

'She took a gulp from a schooner, belched, then keeled over. Stone cold dead,' Regan said. 'At least she died doing what she loved, boozing with her mates.'

One of his earliest memories of Nana Hilda was an outing to the beach. He wasn't sure where or when. They played on the sand in the morning. Nana helped him build a sandcastle but once it was finished Regan kicked it over. In the afternoon his parents and Hilda settled in to the garden bar of a beachside pub. After beseeching their Nana, pulling on her sleeve, the boys were allowed to take a swig of her pint. Such pleading would have earned them nothing more than a smack on the bum from their parents, their concern the loss of valuable beer not their children's wellbeing. Connor smiled as

he remembered how the frothing bubbles had got up his nose, causing a bout of coughing that created hilarity for his parents.

'Jees, don't waste it son!' his father had yelled, laughing through his bushy moustache.

Upon the arrival of each new round the boys had been allowed another sip, and as they learnt to let the beer slide down their throats the gulps got progressively bigger. Afterwards Connor and Regan had run like maniacs through a jungle of legs belonging to tables, chairs and people.

Connor opened his eyes briefly and looked around the near empty carriage. He checked for any old folks that might take umbrage then swung his legs up on the bench opposite. Nestling back into the gap between the seatback and the wall he closed his eyes again.

He couldn't help but be excited by the prospect of an excursion to the city, despite the circumstances. He only ever visited Sydney once, on a rare holiday he and Regan took with his parents. He was maybe ten at the time. He could vaguely remember staying with his grandmother on that trip. Her house, an ancient narrow thing, particularly stuck in his mind. The brothers had run in and out of it from the road front, through to the access lane at the rear and back again. After a clip round the ear from their father they had been sent outside to play, but there was little to keep them amused. They kicked over rubbish cans, relishing the crashing that echoed down the lane. They chased a stray cat down to its end before the animal made its escape under a rusty corrugated iron fence. The hole was too small for them to climb under, but they managed to scale it. On the other side suburban trains whistled by. They stood

watching for a while, then Regan gathered stones and threw them at the trains. Connor cheered nervously each time one hit its mark, pinging off the shiny steel carriages. Regan said he wanted to smash a window and started throwing larger rocks. But then they heard a car braking to a halt on the other side of the fence followed by the squawk of a CB radio. They bolted, sliding on their hands and backsides down the steep bank, oblivious to the rough gravel that scratched them and tore at their trousers. They scampered off down the track before the first shouts of the police reached them and didn't look back.

They ran and ran until finally Regan peeled off the track into a scrubby gully, Connor following close behind. There were well trodden paths through it, and cardboard and tarpaulin lean-to shelters of the homeless. The place was deserted. It stunk like a toilet and rubbish was strewn through the bushes, or half burnt in the blackened earth remains of campfires.

They hid in bushes and watched and waited for the policemen to come along. But after ten minutes Regan proclaimed most cops were too fat and lazy to climb over the fence much less run along the railway tracks after two kids. He spent a minute kicking over the flimsy cardboard shelters, then, seemingly frustrated with the ease with which they had been destroyed, walked from one pile of wrecked cardboard and canvas to the next, pissing on each of them. They had taken a long route back to Hilda's house so that it was almost dark when they got there, but neither his parents nor his grandmother seemed concerned.

Connor's fingers absently traced the scratches and graffiti that were gouged into the wooden armrest. He could have opened his eyes to read the inscriptions but it felt like a challenge to figure them out. There was one that he was sure was 'Rick' but when he glanced down through heavy eyelids he saw that it actually said 'Fuck'.

He closed his eyes again and before long fell asleep.

Seven

Regan was having a shitty day.

First there was the ponsy funeral director who kept asking him these endless bloody questions about what he referred to as 'the arrangements'. *Burial or cremation? What type of casket would you prefer? Will you provide the pallbearers or shall we? What do you want in the way of flowers? And music?* On and on it went.

He told him early in the piece that Hilda was a simple woman and would want things kept simple. But each time he started off showing Regan the most expensive option, then worked his way slowly back to the cheaper ones. Finally Regan had had enough. He grabbed the greasy little mortician by his collar.

'Shut the fuck up' he shouted into his face then released the little man with a shove. He dumped a wad of cash on his desk.

'Is five hundred bucks enough or not?'

The mortician looked so startled that Regan wondered if he'd shit his pants. Then he nodded slowly without saying another word and Regan stood and left. He'd left a decent burnout on the new white concrete of the prick's neat little parking area for good measure.

Then he went across to his grandmother's place, a pokey little one level joint in Randwick. It had only been two days, and Hilda wasn't even in the ground yet, but the place was rented and Regan figured there was no point in stuffing around paying a

landlord for a house that was sitting empty. On the way there he picked up some empty fruit boxes from the local greengrocer, stacking them across the backseat and boot.

He intended to get in and get out and do the job quick. But after he arrived and dumped the boxes in a pile in the hallway he found himself wandering listlessly from room to room.

On the mantelpiece in her bedroom was a series of trophies and cups he'd never bothered to look at. A couple of the newer ones were from her bowls. But there were others, their silver surface dulled with tarnish, that were prizes for swimming. Butterfly and backstroke. One was for third place at the National Champs, 1937. Regan couldn't imagine his Nana as a swimmer. He might have liked to ask her about it.

By her bedside table was a framed photo of Regan and Connor, wearing their school uniforms. He couldn't remember it being taken, but guessed it at the start of their final school year. Hilda came up once each year in February, to meet the principal and pay their fees. She would then take the boys out to lunch at the best restaurant in town. She let them order whatever they wanted. Only that year she came up twice. When he got expelled Regan had told them he was old enough to make his own way to Sydney but they would have none of it. They made him sleep that last night in the basement of the principal's house on a crappy camp bed. He wasn't allowed back to the dorm, not even to pack up his stuff. Then Hilda turned up in her old Morris 1000. She'd been less than impressed to be told that her grandson would need to be collected from the school. She was in her mid-sixties and had lived on her own for many years – his

grandfather was never spoken of – and she would have had no reason to believe she hadn't seen the last of looking after children several decades earlier.

'Bloody Catholic hypocrite bastards,' she croaked through the cigarettes she chain smoked all the way to Sydney. 'Like Pontius Pilate, they washed their hands of you didn't they.'

Having not been overly attentive during religious studies Regan didn't know who Pontius Pilate was but he like the way Nana Hilda called the Brothers bastards. Indeed he soon found much to like about the plucky old girl.

Hilda had no intention of letting Regan's arrival affect her regimen of bowls, pokies and long sessions at the Coogee RSL Club. She set a bed up for him in the add-on at the back of the house that served as a laundry. Whilst it was bitterly cold out there during the winter months, Regan loved having a space of his own, something a twin and boarding school boy was quite unaccustomed to. It meant he could come and go as he pleased via the service lane that ran along the rear of the block, not that Hilda would know less likely care about his whereabouts at any given time. It wasn't that she took no interest in him. It was simply that from the day he arrived aged seventeen she treated him as an adult. She assumed he could cook his own meals and indeed he needed to learn quickly or face the prospect of cold baked beans. At first he sneaked beer from the fridge, but when she admonished him – not for drinking, but for putting his empties in the dustbin when the bottles were worth a cent's refund – he simply helped himself as he might have done a loaf of bread.

One day when he was summoned to the RSL after Hilda had left her heartburn pills at home she had put a schooner of draught in front of him to signal he was welcome to stay. Since that time he became a regular at the club, whilst lacking the time or inclination to put in the long hours of Hilda and her cronies. He enjoyed their companionship, tall stories and lewd jokes. They too seemed to take pleasure in the novel company of someone fifty years younger, or at least the opportunity to entertain a new audience with old gags.

It was at the RSL Hilda had introduced Regan to the accountant William James. He was another of the club's regulars, a solitary figure perched crow-like on a stool in front of a poker machine. Hilda had worked with James at the brewery prior to her retirement, and his imprisonment for fraud. They remained in contact as the result of Coogee being their boozier of choice. Regan was more than happy at the prospect of a job running errands for a businessman named Frank Sheldon. He had no desire to return and finish to school, was bored and had no money.

He arrived at Sheldon's offices at nine each morning to await his instructions before heading off to race around the city streets on a rusty ten-speed bike he had salvaged from the shed at Hilda's. He would duck and dive through the traffic, flog himself until breathless uphill then position himself as low as possible on the downhill to maximise his speed, letting the headwind refill his lungs. Car horns would blare and he gave them the fingers in response or shouted *Fuck You* at the top of his lungs. He would be asked to deliver fat envelopes sealed with wax to council offices in the CBD, but his duties also included the more mundane, buying Sheldon smokes or placing a bet on the horses. He loved that job. And there was nothing like the feeling of the first time

he had walked into the RSL and bought a beer with his own money. For this he had his grandmother to thank.

He stopped wandering and sat on Hilda's bed. He looked around the room at her meagre possessions and realised that he brought too many boxes. Imagine the sum total of your life could fit in the back seat of a car? Regan shook his head at the indignity of it. No way would he let that happen to him. They'd need a fleet of semis to pack up his stuff.

He stood and opened the wardrobe. On the shelf was a shoebox filled with correspondence, certificates and the like. He picked out her bank book, a letter which showed the landlord's contact details and her birth certificate, then threw the rest into the rubbish out front. He gathered two handfuls of hanging garments and stuffed them into a box. He tossed four pairs of shoes on top. The drawers of her dresser contained more clothes and he threw these into another box. They smelled of the musky perfume she wore. The top drawer of the dresser contained a hair brush, makeup and some vials filled with prescription pills. He took the drawer out and tipped the whole lot out in in the rubbish. On the top of the dresser there was a lacquered glory box and he took this without opening it and put into another fruit box along with the silver trophies from the mantelpiece. These would be the only things of hers he kept. The two boxes of clothes could be dropped to the Sallys. The landlord could do what he liked with the furniture which Regan reckoned was as good as worthless anyway. And that was it. Ten minutes to pack up sixty-nine years.

There was one solitary beer left in the fridge. Regan popped the top off it and took a long swig. *Here's to you Hilda.*

Later that afternoon he dropped Hilda's stuff off and with the taste of that first beer in his mouth stopped at a bottle-o and bought another two quarts. Connor's train was due round six, and at five minutes to he drove down into the long shadows of the street that ran down in front of Central Station. He stopped right outside and looked out at the park opposite, the domain of drunks and Abos. With a shake of the head he drained the second quart and dropped the empty out the window. It jiggled along the roadway then fell silent as it came to rest out of sight in the gutter.

He turned the ignition off and listened to the engine ticking as it cooled. Out of the corner of his eye he could see female office workers rushing into the station to make their commute home. Unusually for him he felt in no mood to perve. Instead he lowered his head back to the headrest and let his eyes draw closed.

It wasn't just his Nana's death and all this bullshit with the funeral getting him down. The imminent arrival of his brother was playing on his mind.

On the one hand Connor was now his only living relative. And family were still family after all. He was sure Connor would be impressed with his car, clothes and apartment. They would go out tonight and Regan would show him a good time, big city style, no expense spared. Then his brother could go back to Broken River with stories of how well Regan was doing in the big smoke. Make a few people green with envy.

But there was part of Regan that wished his brother was not coming at all. Broken River, boarding school, his good-for-nothing parents, Rose and her child. This was all

stuff he was happy to turn his back on and forget. And that included his brother, his identical twin. They were, Regan reckoned, identical only as far as looks went. In every other aspect they were so different they may as well live on different planets. And now planet Conner was coming into Regan's universe. With him he would bring Broken River. It would be on his clothes, his haircut, in the way that he walked and talked. He would bring stories of 'home', an encyclopaedia of the mundane. Regan would hear how the rugby team was doing, about work at the bloody sugar refinery, and receive endless updates on who was getting married and who had left town. As if he could give two shits about any of it.

He reached out and caressed the keys that hung from the ignition, toying with idea of firing the car up and driving away, leaving his gormless twin brother stranded, waiting for a ride that would never come. He wondered how long he'd wait. Hours probably. Then he'd be able to do nothing but turn around and get back on the next train to Broken River. Connor couldn't handle the city. The place where Regan was thriving was for men. Connor was still a boy, a small-town baby. Better to be a small fish in a big pond than a sprat in a puddle. And this small fish was going to get fat, real fat.

A horn blared. Regan jumped out of his seat, wrenching his head forward with such force that for an instant he thought his car had been hit from behind. But the rear view mirror was clear. From his right that he heard the rattle of a diesel engine and the hydraulic hiss of a bus door opening.

'Hey dickhead, can't you read?'

The driver, a young guy, Italian by the look of him, leaned towards the open door of the bus to glare at Regan. When Regan turned slowly to meet his stare the driver pointed up to the signpost several metres in front of them.

'It says 'Bus stop''.

'Are you talking to me. Cunt.'

He spoke so softly that the driver might not have heard him over the hum of the engine. But Regan knew he heard.

'Look mate just move your fuckin car alright.'

'No. It's not alright'

Slowly he opened the door of his car and stepped onto the roadway.

Eight

Connor looked out the train's window. Half asleep, his eyes narrow slits. Streaming past the bush was an infinite sea of green stretching as far as the horizon. He saw waves of it shoaling up over hilltops. They peaked then crashed down into deep valleys before rising to form again on the next ridgeline. The bush canopy looked smooth, like a good clean offshore swell. An occasional rocky outcrop would pierce through it, the flash of foam on a wave's crest.

Connor surfed the green waves. His board skimmed across the tree tops, an infinitely long unbroken ride.

He closed his eyes and allowed his imagination to take him there completely. He swayed back and forth with the rolling motion of the train, feeling the change of gravity as he sped down the wave face before slowing to cut back to its lip.

He smiled with the sensation, not caring how silly he looked to the other passengers. They were no longer there. It was just Connor alone on his own private green surf break. It went on forever. He felt weightless and free.

He woke as the train began to slow half an hour out of Sydney, dismayed to find his green ocean gone, dug up and paved over.

On the outskirts of the city he looked with amazement at the vast tracts of bright orange clay, its surface scored by bulldozers. Paved roads of black bitumen with clean

white concrete curbs and footpaths snaking through it. From these raw beginnings neighbourhoods sprouted, a forest of red brick and brown tile.

As the train rolled through more established areas Connor peered into the back yards of houses that bordered the railway line. Fenced yards flashed by like a slide show. Washing dried on a clothesline. A rusty lawnmower drowned in long grass. Three legged barbeques jostled for space with plastic children's toys.

Before long the separate houses on their quarter acre sections gave way to squat brick apartment buildings. Grey warehouses made of corrugated steel. Mirror glass office blocks.

The announcer's voice squawked through the loudspeaker. 'The next station is Central. This is the final station on this service. All change here. All change.'

Connor wondered what he would change into, given the chance.

As the first glimpses of Sydney's skyline came into view he fantasised of a life lived here in the city. He would have an apartment in an upmarket harbour side suburb. It would have a balcony with a view of the water. He would commute on a ferry each day wearing a suit and tie, his own not his father's hand-me-down. He would take an elevator up to his highly paid job on the top floor of a huge office building. He smiled at the thought of getting paid to work in an air-conditioned office, escaping the heat and noise of the sugar mill. Earning a living with a pen and paper instead of loading a hopper. He could drink in a different pub every night, never having to return to the same one two nights running.

The train plunged into a tunnel, the cityscape disappearing as suddenly as if someone had covered over the sun. Connor continued staring out of the window but only darkness looked back. Occasionally ducting or a pillar would take shape in the light of a signal box. Signs for emergency exits flashed past, illuminating the tunnel like flares.

People began to rise and fuss over luggage and children. The train slowed further then emerged into the gloomy half-light of the station. It crawled slowly along the platform before coming to a jerking halt, its brakes screaming in protest before falling silent.

Connor waited for the other passengers to exit then hauled his duffle bag over his shoulder and stepped out onto the platform. The setting sun was creeping below the station's roof, its glow glinting off rooftops that stretched to the west as far as he could see.

He fished a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket.

'Excuse me mate, do you know where the way out to the Eddy Avenue exit is?'

The man he'd asked wore a suit just that same as Connor did, although he looked him up and down as though he'd come to the city wearing gumboots and a bush shirt. He pointed down the platform.

'See the sign that says 'Exit to Eddy Avenue'? I think it's somewhere down that way' he said with a smirk.

Connor flushed hot with embarrassment.

'Oh. Thanks' he said, but the man had already turned away.

At the end of the platform he descended a staircase and walked along a subway that ran under the lines. It smelt of fetid water. Fluorescent lights lining the ceiling flickered on and off. Halfway along its length there was a man sprawled against the wall, one leg sticking out at a crazy angle. He wore jeans and a khaki jacket. Connor initially wondered if he was crook however as he drew closer he saw the man bring a can to his lips and drink from it. On his lap a square of cardboard was propped on which a message had been written in black marker pen. Connor veered to the left to give the man a wide berth. His eyes remained glued to him, and the scrawled letters on his sign came into view.

Vietnam Vet. Homeless and Hungry. Help.

The man's face was an unshaven mess of grey beard, crusted with dirt. His skin was dark and leathery. A baseball cap was pulled down low over his forehead. As Connor drew level with him he looked up and their eyes met.

'Spare some change for a Vietnam Vet?'

Connor looked away and quickened his stride.

The man yelled after him.

'Happy to gawk at my misery but not to help me out. Bastard.'

The tunnel opened into a wide concourse. Connor walked into its centre then stopped to get his bearings. The space was bisected by a barrier. Gates channelled passengers through so tickets could be inspected. Commuters streamed through the gates, some going out but most coming in. They headed through the corridor from which Connor

had come, or strode up steps under a sign indicating it led to Suburban Trains. They moved around Connor like he was a log caught in the middle of a swift flowing river. Their heads down, not one of them so much as looked at him. Back home it could take you ten minutes to walk one block with all the stopping and greeting that went on.

A droning voice blared through loudspeakers, announcing of the arrival of this service or that, advising of platform changes and delays. Connor stood and watched it all, not sure if he was more excited or intimidated by the mess of activity.

He pulled his duffle bag round to the front and held it tightly to him. Not much in there to steal, but no point taking the risk. He walked towards the barricade, ticket held out ready. At the threshold he could see no one checking, and he had only paused for a moment before a shove in his back helped him on his way. Must simply be too many people to check, he thought to himself.

Stepping out into the fading daylight he walked through a sloping courtyard. On either side were a series of small booths. Drinks, Chips and Confectionary. Magazines and Newspapers. Tobacco. He could smell deep fried food. In the middle of the mall newspaper vendors perched on small wooden platform. One wore a cotton bib for The Sun, another the Daily Mirror. They yelled above the heads of the crowd.

'Four Killed in Anti War Riot!'

'US Troops fire on Student Protestors!'

Connor threaded his way through the crowd and made his way to the dingy street that he assumed was Eddy Avenue. Trains rumbled across the bridge overhead, flashes of

sparks accompanying the screech of metal against metal. To his right buses sat parked along the footpath, their engines idling as they waited for the passengers queuing alongside to board.

Looking to his left Connor saw a gold Holden Kingswood hemmed in by a double-parked bus. In the space between the car and the bus a crowd had gathered, and there appeared to be a row going on in the midst of it.

With no sign of Regan, Connor ambled in that direction, drawn like a number of other passersby to the raised voices and movement of bodies pushing and shoving against each other.

As he drew level with the gold Holden, he looked over its roof. A man wearing a blue uniform was retreating up the stairs of the bus, looking back into the centre of the crowd. He was holding his hand up to his chin where blood was coming from a cut in his lip.

'You crazy man. You fuckin' crazy.'

Connor couldn't see who the man was shouting at, so he used the roof of the car to push himself up for a better view. Most of the crowd were spectators but a smaller group of men, a mixture of bus drivers and commuters were restraining one man who strained to get free so he could go after the Italian looking guy.

When the man spoke Connor immediately recognised the voice.

'You fuckin well want some more, wog boy?'

'Regan, what the fuck are you doing?' Connor shouted across the roof of the car.

At the sound of his name Regan turned to look for his brother in the crowd, his sudden change in direction causing several of those restraining him to stumble off balance.

'Connor my brother,' Regan said with a mad smile. 'Welcome to Sydney!'

He pushed his way through the men that had been holding him. They watched this new development with bewildered looks, glancing from one identical twin to the other. Spectators hurriedly stepped back out of the way and gave Regan a wide berth as he skipped around to the other side of the car.

'Good to see you mate.'

He extended his hand out to Connor who looked at it with a blank expression. After a moment he reached out to take it, and the two brothers shook hands.

Sensing the action was over the crowd had begun to disperse. The bus driver rubbed his jaw and looked relieved.

'Is that all your luggage? Here let me grab it.'

Regan leaned across to take Connor's duffle bag.

'What the fuck is going on here Reegs?'

'Just trying to teach some manners to that *wog*.'

He shouted the last word, shooting a dirty look in the direction of the driver who was still watching him warily from the steps of his bus, then tossed Connor's bag through the open window onto the back seat. He swung the passenger door open.

'Get in bro.'

Conner sat in the passenger seat and closed the door, eager to go.

Regan walked around to the driver's side. He opened the door and then as he was about to get in he raised his fists and took one step in the direction of the bus driver, slapping the sole of his shoe hard onto the ground. The movement and sound caused the driver to recoil, retreating backwards up one more step in the bus's stairwell.

Regan gave a laugh, low and sinister.

'Mind your fuckin manners next time.'

He spat on the ground then turned and jumped in behind the wheel.

'Fancy a beer?'

Connor nodded his head slowly. 'Yeah. Sure. Whatever.'

Regan gunned the engine and with a squeal of tyres drove off.

Nine

'What the fuck was going on back there?'

Regan shrugged.

He always found it best not to justify his actions. There could be no argument, he figured, if only one person was voicing an opinion. To respond with nothing was the easiest way to ensure that such discussion petered out quickly. Even in his school days when disciplinary action came his way he would stand in silence and wait until the teacher ran out of puff. Finally, exasperated, the teacher would ask 'Do you have anything to say for yourself boy?' to which Regan would answer promptly 'No Sir. Sorry Sir.'

But of course he never felt any genuine regret.

Right now, for instance, he was feeling much better as the result of walloping that smart little bus driver. Not worth trying to explain that to his docile twin brother. It had cleared his head, got the juices flowing. He smiled to himself at the thought of that wog, whimpering and bleeding. He'd changed his tune pretty flamin quick.

'Cunt was asking for it' he mumbled, breaking his own rule.

'Asking for it?' said Connor. 'What the fuck did he do to ask for it?'

Regan was ready for another beer. Or maybe something stronger. He shook his head and looked out the window, reverting to his policy of silence.

As they approached the Town Hall, Regan could see groups of people milling around. They had long hair and wore corduroy and denim and shirts with tie-dyed patterns. Pamphlets swirled around in the gusting wind. As they pulled up to the red traffic light he could see a placard proclaiming *Hell no, we won't go* sitting discarded on the road. He pulled the steering wheel to the right and steered the car onto it, smiling to himself as he heard the timber frame splintering.

A pony-tailed man wearing rainbow striped trousers crossed at the lights in front of them. His t-shirt had *Make Love Not War* emblazoned on it. Regan saw an opportunity to change the subject.

'Fuckin hippy losers.'

He tooted the horn and leaned out the window.

'Get a fuckin job' he yelled at the man, who ignored him with the ease of someone well used to such abuse. He kept walking, only bothering to pop the fingers over his shoulder once he was safely on the other side of the road.

'Fucking loser.'

'What's been going on here?' Connor asked.

'Anti-war protest. Happen twice a week at the moment. Dickheads. Fucks with the traffic.'

The light changed to green and he drove on. He decided to head down towards the Rocks to find a pub. Regan normally drank in swanky bars in the city, or if it was later in the nightclubs of Kings Cross. But when he saw the state of Connor, dressed in an

awful ill-fitting suit, he decided an out of the way workingman's boozier would be more suitable. Regan had little desire to be a source of entertainment, and he would inevitably bump into someone he knew down the Cross. He hadn't told anyone he had a brother, let alone a twin. He could only imagine the fun they would have at his expense when they saw this country bumpkin version of himself.

'Where did you get that suit from?'

'Don't you recognise it?'

Regan looked Connor up and down, hoping he kept the distain from showing on his face.

'Uh, no.'

'It's dads.'

Regan looked at it again, then turned back to the road with a slight shake of his head.

'What? It looks alright doesn't it?'

Maybe if it was still the 1950s Regan thought. *And if you were a stone lighter.*

'Don't remember dad ever wearing it' he said.

Connor thought for a moment. 'No, neither do I.'

As they turned at the bottom of George Street they left behind office blocks with mirror glass and mausoleum-like entrance foyers and entered The Rocks. It was as if they had travelling the last fifty metres in a time machine. Regan disliked The Rocks. The crumbling sandstone and rotting timber of warehouses and wool stores and

churches and crappy run down terrace houses. He loathed the way the buildings were all crowded together around dirty lanes that could twist your head around like a maze. The Rocks were the old Sydney, and men like Regan and Frank Sheldon were the new Sydney. The quicker the invertebrates that lived in hovels like this could be cleaned out, the sooner men of their ilk could bring the city into the twentieth century.

'Whose car is this?' Connor asked.

'It's mine mate. Isn't she a beauty? It's the latest model, V8, I picked it up new off the...'

'I mean where did you get it?'

'What do you think I stole it?'

Connor said nothing and Regan could feel his stare.

'Well just to put you right, I earned it fair and square'.

'Doing what exactly?'

Regan accelerated up through the Argyle Cut, a gully hewn by convicts through the sandstone ridge that The Rocks was built. Above them cars shed across the approach to the Harbour Bridge. The growl of the Kingswood's exhaust bounced off the sheer walls and back through the open car windows, raw and aggressive.

'That's fuckin nice that is. My own brother reckons I steal cars for a living.'

'Well what is it that you do then?'

Regan shook his head and bit his lip, feigning disappointment.

'I'll fill you in over a beer. We're almost there.'

Regan pulled up outside the Captain Cook Hotel. The pubs on this side of The Rocks attracted none of the office workers or tourists that sauntered into the hotels a few blocks from the bottom of town. This area was strictly the domain of local residents and port workers sinking a few jugs at the end of their shift.

Regan held open the swing door for Connor, then followed him inside.

The bar was busy. A halo of blue cigarette smoke hung at eye level. Most of the patrons were wearing overalls, and the place smelt a little greasy, like a mechanic's workshop. No one turned to look at the two new arrivals. As they walked to the bar Regan could feel the stickiness of the carpet under his shoes.

He removed a silver money clip from his jacket pocket. It held a large wad of banknotes, more than the two of them could possibly spend. To Regan's disappointment Connor was looking around the bar and did not seem to notice.

'What are you havin'?' he asked.

'Just a beer. Tooheys if they have it.'

'You can have anything you like here mate, you don't have to drink what you have back home.'

'A Tooheys will be fine' he said and sauntered off to take a table in the corner.

After exchanging drinks, money and a crude comment with the barmaid, Regan joined his brother. He made a point of dropping his money clip on the table when he passed

Connor his beer, and was sure that his brother gave a double take before picking up his pint.

'What's that you're drinking?'

Regan sipped at his drink, the ice jingling merrily against the tumbler.

'J&B with soda.'

'What?'

'J&B. Scotch.'

'Too good to drink beer now are ya?'

Regan shrugged. 'I still drink beer. But too much gives you a gut.'

Connor glanced down and examined himself. The front of his jacket had fallen open and hung at his sides. He sat up straighter in his chair.

'Not if you're a working man it doesn't.'

'What, you think I don't work?'

'You still haven't told me what it is that has you driving a new car and flashing your money around.'

Regan picked up his money clip and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

'Not all work involves backbreaking labour. I don't need to work in a flamin sugar mill to earn a crust.'

'What are you trying to say?' Conner leaned in closer. He eyeballed Regan who held his stare.

'What I am trying to say, *brother*, is that what I do just involves using this.' Regan tapped the side of his forehead. 'I use my brain not my brawn to make a buck.'

Connor shot his brother a caustic smile. 'Sorry *brother*, I missed the name of the university you attended.'

'It's called the University of Life' Regan smiled back coolly, happy to be given an opportunity to quote Frank Sheldon.

Connor took a long draw on his beer and then leaned in close to Regan.

'So what exactly do... you... do?'

Regan settled back into his chair with his whiskey clasped in both hands, a storyteller's pose.

'I work for, or rather *with*, Sydney's leading property developer, Frank Sheldon.'

Regan explained to Connor, in more detail than he expected his brother to understand, the dynamics of the Sydney property scene. He spoke of Frank Sheldon as a man of immense vision, seeing the opportunity for redevelopment of cheap property in close proximity to the city. He described the construction that Sheldon had already completed in Elizabeth Bay, where stately houses on large sections, and entire blocks of terrace houses had been removed to make way for high-rise towers. Sheldon, he explained, believed apartment living was the way of the future.

'Just think,' Regan enthused, leaning forward on his chair, 'in the place of one single dwelling, or a handful of run-down old terraces, you can sell twenty or thirty separate apartments, most of them with harbour views.'

As he continued on terms like 'urban sprawl' and 'gentrification' rolled off Regan's tongue with ease, recycling the same words he had heard Sheldon use on many occasions.

He took a sip on his scotch and relaxed back into his chair.

'So what is it that you actually do for this bloke Sheldon?'

'On behalf of Mister Sheldon I negotiate the purchase of properties with landowners in the development zone. Obviously we need to secure property in the right area at the right price for the project to be successful.'

Connor took another swig of his beer and looked at his brother sceptically.

'Well if you carry on like you did back there at the train station you won't be working for anyone for a while. I don't know about Sydney, but back home in Broken River if you pulled a stunt like that you'd end up in the slammer.'

Regan sat back in his chair with an exaggerated shrug, spreading his arms open and raising his palms to the ceiling. 'As you can imagine, men like Frank Sheldon are very well connected with the wider Sydney business community, including law enforcement. Any problems that arise we generally deal with privately.'

'So is that the way it works here is it?'

'That,' replied Regan, dropping his head to peer back at Connor conspiratorially under his eyelids, 'is exactly how it works.'

He slapped his hands on the table to signal the end of the conversation.

'Now let me get you another beer.'

Connor reached over and placed a hand on Regan's shoulder. 'I'll get them. My round.'

Regan pushed the hand away dismissively. 'No problem, let me buy today.'

Connor stood. 'I can afford to buy my own.'

Regan extended an arm in the direction of the bar. 'Be my guest then.'

'What did you call that scotch you're drinking?'

'J&B with soda. On the rocks.'

'On the Rocks?' Connor stopped and looked quizzically at his brother.

'With ice.'

Ten

Lucinda's pram juddered over the ruts and corrugations in the driveway. The gravel was long gone in most places, washed away by season after season of winter storms. Rose threaded her way through a slalom course of large potholes. Occasionally one was unavoidable and as the pram bounced through it Lucinda would shriek with simple pleasure. The rough ride didn't seem to bother the wee girl. From the pram Rose could hear her constant happy baby chatter. It made her smile.

This year the rains were late. The ground was hard and dry, the grass browned off. Dust kicked up from Rose's heels, trailing behind her like a veil.

The morning sun shone brightly, but in the shade of the gum trees that ran along the driveway the air remained cold. Rose pulled her cardigan together at the front and quickened her stride, an effort to warm herself as well as ensure she was on time for the one and only bus into town.

She reached the roadway and checked her watch. Five to eleven, plenty of time. She checked on Lucinda to find that, as usual, the bouncing journey had jostled her to sleep. Leaving the pram in the shade Rose stepped into the sunlight. She closed her eyes and savoured its warmth. She could hear a kookaburra cackling in the distance, before it was shushed into silence by wind rustling the leaves of the gum trees. The flag of the mailbox flapped in the wind, drumming a tinny beat. She used its rhythm to slow her breathing, inhaling the aromas of the countryside through her nostrils. Eucalyptus, straw and dirt.

She didn't open her eyes until she heard the rumble and squeak of the ancient Bedford bus approaching. The driver courteously ran through the gears to slow down, making the last fifty metres at a crawling pace so as not to bath Rose and Lucinda in a cloud of dust. Once finally upon them, the brakes squealed to bring the bus to a halt. The door opened with a creak and a slap. Dave the driver awkwardly eased himself from behind the steering wheel. Dave was well into his thirties, but carried the rosy skin and baby fat of a pre-pubescent teen. He dressed like he was still at primary school, baggy shorts over roman sandals and walk-socks.

'Good Morning Rose' he greeted her with a smile, panting slightly with the effort to get down the stairs. He looked her up and down appreciatively whilst running his thumbs under his belt in a distracted effort to tuck himself in. The result left more of his shirt hanging out than before, and exposed a triangle of his belly, hairless and pink.

'Hi Dave' Rose replied with practised indifference.

Finally Dave stopped gawking and picked up the front of Lucinda's pram. He walked backwards up the stairs, Rose pushing from the back.

'I missed you yesterday. I was concerned that you might have been unwell.'

Rose smiled to herself. The country bus runs were predominantly used by those too old to drive, and on this route Rose was usually the youngest passenger by a good forty years. Dave, a bachelor who lived at home with his mother, had decreed that the best place for the pram was wedged in the void between the windscreen and the front steps. This necessitated Rose sitting on the other side of the stairwell in the very front seat.

'Connor caught the morning train to Sydney, threw my schedule out.'

As if you have a busy schedule. But Dave nodded earnestly as if he knew exactly what she meant.

'To Sydney, really? What takes him there?'

Dave usually became subdued when she mentioned Connor's name, hence it was something she tried to do within minutes of coming on board. However today he brightened at the prospect of getting some gossip first hand. Maybe, Rose wondered, she'd tell him that Connor had run off, leaving her all on her own, just to watch his reaction. But she suppressed her mischievous thoughts and instead provided basic details of the events leading to Connor's unscheduled journey. Dave listened closely.

Despite being guarded with Dave, Rose didn't mind the non-stop chatter of the bus trip into town and was somewhat flattered by his attention. For the bulk of her week she had only Lucinda for company. When Connor was home he was either rushing to get ready for work or dead tired after a ten hour shift, the desire for sleep taking precedence over conversation. It was nice to have someone to talk with, someone who was attentive and engaged.

Dave was, however, a far better talker than listener and he quickly took over the conversation. He began telling Rose about his own recent journey to Sydney. Rose knew that his trip was likely taken with, and paid for by his elderly mother, but he made no mention of her.

'I stayed at the Warwick, which isn't the best hotel in the city, but is close to the theatre district. I prefer going to the matinees of course, leaves the evening open for dinner.'

Dave dropped the names of Sydney restaurants, hotels and theatres freely, as if they should be known to her. For her part Rose simply nodded and smiled, saying nothing to reveal her complete ignorance of most everything he spoke of.

'Oh, and did you hear they are pulling down the Trocadero?'

Rose had never heard of the Trocadero and wasn't even sure what it was. Fortunately Dave continued on, not seeming to require a response.

'Such a shame. The end of an era really. And what are they putting up in its place? Apartments! I ask you. It's another death nail for live theatre.'

As Dave talked on, Rose gazed out the window as the first outlying houses of Broken River came into view. Soon they passed the grey fibrolite house she was raised in. The new owners had cut the grass and planted flower beds either side of the front door in an attempt to soften its stark looks. Rose's mother had no time for gardening or other such mundane tasks, preferring to expend her energies on entertaining a succession of men who she met whilst working behind the bar of the Commercial Hotel. Her regular boyfriends hung around for anything from three months up to a couple of years. There was a Ron and a Todd, a Ray and a Kevin.

Then came Rex, and it was with him that she moved to the Far North not long after Rose had broken the news she was pregnant. Her mother made a brief attempt at

expressing the type of moralistic outrage that was soon to spread through Broken River's chattering classes. But it was a facade she struggled to maintain. Her mother certainly had little by way of comeback when Rose pointed out the hypocrisy of such criticism given her own chequered history.

Then, when Rose confirmed the boy in question intended to 'stand by her', her mother barely contained her glee as she realised this would allow her and Rex to escape Broken River and go north much sooner than anticipated.

Rose was broken from her thoughts with the realisation that Dave had turned in his seat and was looking at her with the expectant expression of someone with an unanswered question.

'Sorry Dave what was that?'

'I was just wondering when Connor gets back?' he repeated in a tone that feigned as much nonchalance as he could muster.

'Sunday.'

Dave turned his attention back to driving, straining to drag the gearstick down into second to make the turn into River Road, Broken River's broad main street.

'Well if there is anything you need whilst Connor is away please don't hesitate to ask. A broken pipe or if this wind gets up as forecast and lifts the metal off your roof, I'm pretty handy round the place as you can imagine'.

Rose couldn't really imagine but let him continue.

'And I suppose it could get a little lonely out there at night, so if...'

'Thanks Dave, I will certainly let you know if I need anything.'

To her relief the bus stop was upon them before Dave could elaborate further.

Ignoring her objections he made the other passengers wait whilst they struggled down the stairs with the pram. She bade him goodbye hastily and headed away.

Her first stop was Abel's Book Exchange. She had for Abel's a fondness which, based on appearances at least, the establishment was undeserving of.

It was situated at the far end of a narrow arcade filled with low rent shops. Rose steered the pram around concrete planter boxes that now sat empty with only yellow cigarettes butts sprouting from the soil. Most of the shops were vacant. Only the barber shop next door to Abel's provided the back end of the arcade with a measure of activity. From there she could hear a murmur of male voices, the clicking of scissors and the buzz of electric clippers. An occasional outburst of mischievous laughter made her wonder what dirty joke or tall story had just been told.

The aisles of Abel's were far too narrow to allow Lucinda's pram to enter. Rose applied the brake and positioned the pram so it was visible above the window display of faded titles, unchanged since her first visit. She would always make Abel's her first stop in town as she knew Lucinda would be sleeping soundly after her mid-morning feed and the calming effect of the bumpy journey into town. She would stay in Abel's until she heard Lucinda began to wake.

At the shop's entrance Rose paused. She loved the smell of books and couldn't think of any scent that was quite the same. She could vaguely recall her grandmother caution her about bacteria that thrived in 'hand-me-downs'. But Rose retained no lingering concerns from these warnings, and her modest selection of second-hand books was her most prized possession, although Rose would have to admit there was limited competition for the ranking.

The books – there was a total of fourteen now – were stacked in her bedroom on a simple bookshelf fashioned from two stacks of bricks and a length of timber. The wood was macrocarpa which had a swirling grain. It came up nicely after Rose polished it with furniture oil, and contrasted nicely against the red clay bricks, salvaged from a stack behind the old barn.

Stepping inside Rose would first check the wire basket by the door which was full of obscure titles and affixed with a black and orange sign advertising 'Specials' with 'all 10 cents' handwritten underneath in Mrs Abel's characteristic scrawl. Then, once satisfied there had been no classics added to the pile, she began to work her way up and down the narrow aisles.

On her earliest visits, well before she had squirrelled away a few cents here and there to buy her first novel, she browsed through the many thousands of titles at Abel's in a most regimented way. The books in the fiction section were filed by Author's name, and that first day she had started at A. She inspected each title. She read the blurb on the back cover then flicked through the contents, sometimes reading the first page or two. Even when there were multiple copies of the same book she would take each one

from the shelf, even if to do nothing more than look at the amount etched in pencil on the inside cover to see if there was any pricing disparities that would provide the opportunity for a bargain.

Having working her way all the way through to Z over subsequent visits Rose now moved up and down the fiction section swiftly, only looking for new additions. Today there was nothing that caught her eye. She always concluded her browsing at the desk of old Mrs Abel. This was piled high with books that had been recently exchanged but had yet to be sorted onto the bulging shelves.

Rose smiled at the shop's aged proprietor who looked up briefly and nodded a solemn greeting in response before her head disappeared back behind the towers of books. Rose peered up and down the stacks.

Unfortunately on this particular visit she would not be adding another volume to her collection. A chunk of Connor's pay packet had gone at the pub on Wednesday night and he took the remainder with him to pay for his train ticket and travel expenses. In her purse Rose carried the Bank of New South Wales passbook that contained a record of their meagre savings. She would withdraw only what she needed to provide the necessities for her and Lucinda, mindful too that next week Connor's pay would be less for the two days he had taken off work.

Before leaving she first checked on the book she intended to acquire next – a hard cover edition of *The Great Gatsby*. She found it safely hidden in the non-fiction section in the dark back recesses of the store, wedged between two dusty studies of Egyptian

history. It was deliberately misfiled by Rose to ensure it wasn't purchased by another customer.

She lifted it from the shelf and thumbed absently through its pages until she heard Lucinda begin to cry. She replaced the book, whispered a goodbye to Mrs Abel and walked out of the shop to manoeuvre Lucinda's pram down the arcade and onto the street.

A cool wind blew down River Street from the seaward end. Rose could taste a hint of saltwater on it.

She bent to check on Lucinda. After leaving Abel's Rose had gone to the riverside park to feed her and she had been sound asleep ever since, not stirring while Rose conducted her business in the bank, or when she filled the carrier beneath the child with groceries. She saw Lucinda had twisted part way out of her woollen blanket. Her left leg, with its brightly striped sock, protruded at an odd angle. One arm flailed around her face, her tiny pink hand grasping for something visible only in her dreams.

'Hello Rose.'

The voice caused her to stiffen. Rose was born in Broken River and had lived there all her life. She knew most locals but didn't stand chit-chatting in the aisles of the grocery store. She would keep her stare fixed straight ahead as she walked, and would cross the street if necessary to avoid meeting an old classmate or neighbour.

She looked up. Standing in front of her, side by side, was Kathy Rogers and Sally Orchard. Two girls from school. Two girls that used to be her friends.

'Hi' she said her tone lifeless. She looked through them not at them. As if they were made of glass.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Kathy took a step forward. She was carrying a shopping bag with *The Paris Boutique* stencilled on the side which she handed off to Sally, then bent over the pram.

'This must be Lucinda.'

'How did you know her name?'

Kathy looked up, surprised. She turned to Sally for support.

'Well, we... we heard that you'd had a little girl' Sally said.

'Yes,' Kathy said, standing. 'We've kept updated on your progress you know Rose.'

'I thought you both moved away'

'Yes, we're both studying medicine at Brisbane Uni' one said.

'We're training to be nurses'

When they were sixteen, at high school, they talked about going to university together. It was Kathy that had her heart set on nursing. Sally was undecided. Rose had the marks to get into whatever she wanted, medicine, law or engineering. But it was English literature she favoured.

When she could no longer hide her pregnancy, the change was as sudden and pronounced as a storm front rolling in from the south. There was no more talk of university. No talk of anything anymore. To this day she didn't know if her friends' abrupt coldness towards her was a reflection of their own attitudes, or those of their conservative parents.

Her pride prevented her asking them for an explanation. Nor would she beg for their friendship. It was the same silent compliance she had exhibited when first the netball coach, then the school's headmistress sent letters home to say that 'due to her condition' they thought it best she remained home. Her participation deemed 'no longer suitable'. This was perhaps the hardest part. Not their small-minded judgements, nor the fact that they couldn't tell her in person. But that they could not even bear to use the word 'pregnant'.

'Rose, do you want to come?'

She looked blankly at Sally who had just spoken to her.

'Come where?'

The two girls exchanged a glance.

'To the Golden Kettle. For a coffee and some cake. We were just heading there ourselves.'

'No, sorry I have to go.'

She pushed the pram in a wide arc around her former friends.

'It was nice to see you Rose' one or the other said as she passed.

She didn't look back.

As she rounded the corner of River Road the wind shifted to her back and she stopped to rummage around in the pram's carrier for a handkerchief to blow her nose and wipe her eyes.

On impulse she continued down Martin Street, leaving the busy main shops behind her. Past the squat red brick spire of the Catholic Church. In the fenced-off grounds of the rectory an old hall served as the St Vincent-de-Paul charity shop.

A concrete ramp led up to the front door landing. Rose pushed hard against the door. The spring door closer gave a low groan of resistance. She propped a foot to hold the door open then backed the pram in, the door slamming closed with a bang behind her.

'Good morning Mrs Abernathy'

The old woman peered up from behind a trestle table that served as a cashier's desk. The hall was cold. A single bar heater sat under the table, pushing out a weak red beam of warmth onto the old woman's impossibly thin legs. Thick stockings over sensible shoes.

She glanced at her watch.

'It's Good *Afternoon* actually'

Rose smiled. 'Good afternoon then.'

'We close at one on Friday you know.'

'I didn't. But I won't be long.'

She checked on Lucinda again and found her snugly bound and still. Her daughter seemed to remain motionless only when she was being moved somewhere. In her pram, on the bus, or doing chores at home whilst tucked up against Rose in a sling. All other times she danced and contorted like a new-born kitten. Rose wondered there was something within her child that craved constant motion, and only when someone was providing it she would stop twisting and turning. Maybe she took after her father.

Leaving Lucinda she moved towards the clothes racks at the side of the hall. She passed trestle tables filled with bric-a-brac. Glass and china ornaments. Ashtrays with whiskey brands embossed into them. A tea set with blue flowers and faded gold rims. Metal matchbox cars with chipped paintwork. She peered ahead for a flash of orange that would tell her the dress was still there.

Roughly once a month Rose would swing by the Vinnies shop to look for anything that might be of use at home. Her main focus was to find baby clothes which fortunately were in regular supply. She had also bought the occasional item for Connor, and would rifle through the home wares to slowly add to their rudimentary collection of kitchen utensils, buying a rolling pin on one occasion, a cheese grater on another.

She never purchased anything for herself. An inspection of their stock of second hand books would confirm the hodgepodge paperbacks from little-known authors was no competition for Abel's selection, and she found the range of women's clothes, much of it she suspected from deceased estates, to be outmoded.

So on her visit last week the dress had immediately caught her eye. It's summery hue stood out amongst the blues, greys and browns.

The fabric was a paisley print of interlocking orange swirls in the shape of teardrops. At the centre of each swirl was a green sphere like a marble. In between and across these splashes of colour ran a spider's web of pattern in brown, crazy fern fronds that sprouted in every direction. Not only was the fabric far more exotic than Rose's tastes would normally stretch to, the dress was short, ending closer to her waist than to her knees. Up top it was cut elegantly, with a high neck and back and half sleeves that covered the shoulders.

It was still there. Rose could see the brilliant orange poking out from behind a sapphire blue ball dress which was all satin and frills. Since her visit of the previous week her thoughts had turned to the dress often. But after their recent budgetary constraints she had pushed the thoughts from her mind.

She took it from the rack and held it up to the light shining in through the high, frosted windows to admire it once more. It was unusual to find something so fashionable at the St Vincent's shop.

She smiled. *It might not be The Paris Boutique, but it's beautiful.*

Rose had already tried the dress on once and found to her surprise it fit perfectly, like it was made for her. Now she folded it carefully over her forearm and carried it to where two small cubicles had been fashioned into changing rooms in the rear corners of the hall.

She pulled the curtain closed. On one wall hung a long mirror that gave Rose a view of herself from head to toe. The only mirrors back at the cottage were small, good enough to use on the odd occasion when she applied makeup. She couldn't remember the last time that was. She found the view of herself the full-size mirror provided quite startling, and Rose, taken with the novelty of it, couldn't help but spend a few moments inspecting herself.

She didn't look until after she had slipped the dress over her head. The fabric felt heavy, its quality apparent to her touch as she smoothed her hands down the dress and twisted it into position. She reached round to the back of her head to free her shoulder length hair from the clip she had hastily fitted it into before rushing to the bus.

The dress was just as short as she remembered. Her legs seemed to fill the mirror disproportionately. She grabbed the hem and tried to stretch it lower.

The scuffed mauve flats she wore really didn't go with the dress and she kicked them off. Her ankles, slender enough, would look much better in heels she mused. Her gaze panned up to her knees. She had always felt they were knobbly and frowned as she noted new blemishes, the result of household chores.

The skin on her upper legs was fair and sprinkled with freckles so light that Rose could hardly make them out in the muted light of the changing cubicle. Nor could she see the fine hair that she had never felt the need to shave.

Her hips belied any sign of childbirth, one positive of Lucinda arriving three weeks premature. Rose's tummy had not, she noted with dismay, returned to its prenatal

state, although this was surely overshadowed by the increased size of her breasts which amply filled out the front of the dress.

Rose stood up tall and couldn't suppress a smile at the sight of her reflection. The transformation that the dress made to her appearance was remarkable.

She made her mind then and there that she would buy it.

She would take it home with her and wear it on Sunday night. She would cook her and Connor a special meal and set the table nicely. She would wait and feed Lucinda just before he got home so she was sleeping quietly. Then she would slip into her new dress.

She checked her watch. It was twenty to one. Remembering Mrs Abernathy's warning she realised she had better hurry if she was to make it to the bank and back before closing.

Before slipping the dress off, she looked herself up and down in the mirror one last time and smiled.

Eleven

Lights flickered in Connor's eyes.

Lurid colours. Pink, green and purple.

The colours formed shapes. Boxes. Poles. Cages.

Figures flitted around in the darkness. A pagan ritual. Their bodies white and naked.

As they moved in and out of the light parts of them came into view but never the complete being. A slender leg with a high heeled shoe. The curve of an arching back. A breast with a pierced nipple. Buttocks tattooed with a rose. Then they were gone again, crawling, twisting, leaping back into the darkness.

Connor couldn't focus. The room kept changing, morphing like a chameleon. It felt like a bad dream. He was drunk, way too drunk. And tired. He felt like he could sleep forever. He wanted to go home. But home was Broken River and he was a long way from there.

Regan had gone upstairs. He remembered now. But he wasn't sure what upstairs was. He looked to the doorway where Regan disappeared. Above it more lights. Stairway to Heaven.

If upstairs is heaven. Is this hell?

He looked down. There was a beer in his hand. He's sure they don't serve beer in hell. So he must be somewhere else.

He sipped the beer. It was warm and flat. He put it down, heard the bottle clank onto the floor and roll away.

He felt sick. Hot.

The shirt Regan gave him to wear was tight, the fabric like plastic. He scratched at the collar, fiddling with the buttons, trying to open it then heard a tear. A button popped off. *Regan will be mad.*

Where is Regan?

He tried to walk. Get outside. Get some fresh air. He couldn't see where was going. He would be convinced he was blind if it wasn't for the lights. On and off, round and up and down the lights pulsed non-stop. The floor sticky under his feet. He kicked a bottle, probably the one he dropped.

Then there was noise. It reached him over the jungle beat the shapes moved to. A commotion. A girl screaming.

'The bastard. I'll kill the bastard'

Figures emerged from the darkness. Not like the shifting shapes. These were real people. Two men wearing suits. Between them a girl in a dressing gown was crying. It was her screaming. Connor knows this because she screams again.

'That's him. That's the bastard'

She pointed at Connor.

He blinked and strained to open his eyes wide enough so they could focus. So he could understand what was going on.

'This guy here?' one of the Suits asked. He pointed at Connor.

'Me?' Connor said. He reached a hand up to his chest and could feel the loose thread where the button popped off.

Now everyone was pointing at him.

'That's the fuckin' bastard' the girl screamed.

Connor felt the impact of the punch without noticing either of the Suits move. He didn't know which one threw it. He doubled over, the wind forced out of him, gasping for breath. Then the next blow came. This one connected with the side of his head, his ear burning hot. And another.

Then he was on the floor still gasping for air. He flailed out with his hands, trying to grasp the bottle he'd dropped. He knew it was out there somewhere. Then another blow came and he retracted his arms. Curled into a ball.

They began to strike with boots rather than fists. They rained upon his back, his head, his buttocks, arms legs everywhere. They were no longer separate blows, just one continuous pummelling.

Connor imagined he was on a conveyor, going through the mill. Sugarcane through the crusher. His life squeezed out of him. Death of a thousand cuts.

The floor dropped away from beneath him. Hands gripped him, dragging him away. He tried to thrash himself free but their grip tightened. The girl's voice again.

'You ever try that again I'll fuckin' kill you.'

He can feel the anger of her spittle on his cheek.

'If I ever see you again I'll fuckin kill you.'

Suddenly the temperature drops. Goosebumps shoot up his spine. He took in the cool air in greedily. There were more lights, but these were different. Some flashed on and off, others remained on permanently. Connor read them. Girls Girls Girls. Full Nude. Lipstix.

Then the hands gripping him are gone. But he was still moving. Then he made contact with the ground again. It shot up fast to meet him and again the air is forced from his lungs.

There is no sticky carpet, no smell of spilt beer or chewing gum. This was hard. The coarse feel of asphalt.

He could taste water dripping down his face, slippery and metallic

He looked up once more at the lights then closed his eyes. When he opened them again the lights were gone and there was darkness. No more gaudy lights. Just beautiful, silent darkness.

He let it envelop him.

More hands were on him.

He didn't know how long he'd been out but he felt better than before.

He could breathe freely and the world stopped spinning. It was cool and wet. His hair was sodden, his fringe pasted onto his forehead. Water dripped into his eyes when he tried to open them.

The hands lifted him upright. His head lolled about. He felt dizzy, a head rush.

'Are you alright buddy?'

He could make out a lamppost, a parked car.

'Let's get him out of the rain.'

'Can you walk buddy?'

Their voices were strange. American.

They lifted him up. His feet took a moment to align themselves. Another moment passed before they could take his weight. A pang of pain shot through his abdomen. He remembered that first punch, it was a beauty. Then he was standing, but not steady. The arms still held him tight, helping him balance.

Another voice. Regans.

'Oi. Fuckin leave him, I'll take him.'

The hands loosened their grip.

'No need to get stroppy, we're just trying to help him up.'

'I don't care what you're trying to do Yankee, just let me have him.'

'How do we know he's your mate, that you didn't do this to him?'

'He's not my mate. He's my brother. Take a look.'

A face filled Connor's vision. Blond hair, white teeth. Fancy shirt with coloured flags on it.

'Shit, you must be identical twins man.'

'And you must be a fuckin' genius. Now piss off and let me take him.'

Connor felt the hands move off him replaced with an arm looping under his shoulders.

'Sorry we tried to help.'

'Next time you might be.'

They started walking slowly. Connor concentrated on making his footsteps.

'I don't know what happened back there.'

Regan was smoking a cigarette. He said nothing, just took a drag then looked back at Connor with a silly grin.

'What are you smiling at?'

'Just thinking how handy it is to have you around. What with taking a beating for me and all.'

'What?'

Regan laughed.

'Mistaken identity. A little whore that thought she should be treated like a lady. Then thinks you're me. Couldn't have scripted it better'

The cackling laugh sounded again.

'Little bitch looked just like your missus. What's her name? Rose'

Connor pushed Regan away and swung a looping punch. It connected with nothing but air. Then, losing his balance he fell, flailing with another optimistic hook on the way down. He landed on his backside with a thud.

Regan was laughing hard now.

'Come on my brother, don't be like that.'

Connor was breathing hard, each lungful shooting pain into his battered stomach. The effort took the anger from his voice.

'Don't you call my wife a bitch' he puffed, 'You just keep away from her.'

'Fuck are you deaf as well as stupid? What is it with people tonight? I never said she was a bitch. I was talking about the other girl. The one who had you kicked in. Calm down for fucksake.'

Regan leaned down to help Connor to his feet. Connor reached up to take the hand offered to him but after grabbing it tightly he leaned back and pulled hard. For a moment Regan attempted to keep his balance, then toppled over, sprawling on the pavement next to Connor.

He pushed himself up with his hands so the two brothers were sitting side by side, each now panting as hard as the other.

'Ah shit, look what you done to my trousers' Regan said.

'Can't be worse than what I've done to your shirt.'

'Yeah, I see that.'

'Can we just get out of here? I'm buggered.'

'Yeah alright. How do you feel about walking home?'

'What, you too pissed to drive us?'

Regan looked away.

'Nah, it's not that. It's just... Well I left the club in a bit of a hurry.'

'Spit it out.'

Regan locked eyes with his brother and for a moment he was seventeen again, getting kicked out of school.

'I left my keys inside didn't I' he said sheepishly.

A chortle of laughter left Connor's throat.

'You want me to go back in and ask for them?'

Regan brightened momentarily before realising the offer was made in jest. Connor began to chuckle and despite himself Regan joined in.

'Wanker.'

'Arsehole.'

Twelve

'Not a bad send-off'

Regan took a draw on his beer. Connor hadn't been able to stomach one yet and was instead ploughing his way through a plate piled high with club sandwiches and sausage rolls.

'Yep. Though I reckon there's more here for the free booze and food than were at the church'

'Good on em'. Old buggers deserve it.'

Regan lit a cigarette before continuing.

'Hilda would have loved this, everyone she knows here, drinking at her favourite pub'

'She would have made the most of the free beer.'

'Too bloody right. When are you going to crack into one?'

Connor shook his head dejectedly and took another bite out of a sandwich. He was still feeling the after effects of the previous evening. He'd woken that morning with daylight streaming through the window of the little flat that Regan lived in. Opening his eyes was a mistake, the sun cut into his brain like a dagger. As he pushed himself out of the light, the springs of the sagging couch he'd slept on snagged his trousers. With the effort of sitting other pains joined that of his throbbing head. Along with his

stomach, which was already showing the first signs of bruising, there was a multitude of other small cuts and bruises along the length of his body.

Fortunately a look in the mirror showed a light graze was the only mark on his face. Connor wasn't sure if it was from a fist, a boot, or hitting the pavement outside the nightclub, but was relieved he wouldn't have to go to his grandmother's funeral looking like a thug.

He finished the last mouthful from his plate and looked hopefully in the direction of the trestle table on which platters of food were laid out. To his disappointment there was little left. Sprigs of parsley that had been used as a garnish and a few unwanted slices of cucumber. In a few short minutes it had been picked clean by the elderly mourners. No chance of seconds.

An elderly couple introduced themselves earlier as former colleagues of Hilda's stopped by to say thank you and bid their farewells. Regan was short with most of the mourners he didn't know, leaving it to Connor to exchange niceties with them. It had been a long day with a steady stream of Hilda's friends, co-workers and acquaintances queuing up to pass on their condolences. In addition Connor had arrived at the church to find a whole heap of details he thought Regan would have taken care of were still outstanding. The nervous little man who introduced himself as the funeral director refused to deal with his brother, which was strange given Regan hired him.

'Good too to see some that didn't even know Hilda turned up. Just to show their support, you know?'

Regan had fallen over himself when Frank Sheldon arrived, rushing up to shake his hand, walking him to his seat. He'd been going on about it ever since. Connor couldn't see him at the wake and he reckoned you'd hardly miss him. Must have been thirty stone. Looked like he enjoyed a drink but probably too good to slum it at the RSL. Connor glanced over Regan's shoulder to see the man that accompanied this Sheldon bloke to the funeral was still here, the one Regan referred to as William James. He was a thin rake of a man with the hungry look of a half-starved dog. Ever since they arrived he'd perched on a bar stool feeding coins into the pokie machines and chain smoking. There been some swarthy-looking wog bloke too, he'd driven the car then stood in the back of the church like a security guard. Regan hadn't bothered to introduce Connor to any of them.

'I'm going for a piss. You want a beer?'

Connor started to shake his head then changed his mind.

'Yeah, alright. Tooheys. Can't hurt can it.'

As Regan sauntered off Connor absently picked up a couple of beer coasters from the table and leant them against each other, then added a third to the top. A further two coasters made a second story, then he carefully added a third.

Over by the bar there was a commotion. The television, which when they'd arrived was playing a telecast of the league, Rabbitohs versus Tigers, was now on a different channel. The screen filled with an image of the Australian Coat of Arms. A flag hung limply on either side of it. There was a few growling objections, but the bar manager

was shaking his head insistently and seemed to be supported by a majority of those gathered around the set.

Shit, the conscription lottery. Connor checked his watch. Almost six o'clock. With all that was going on he'd all but forgotten.

Regan arrived back with two beers.

Connor took a quick sip and pointed over Regan's shoulder.

'Almost six o'clock.'

Regan looked at him blankly

'So?'

'The ballot? You not interested in to see if you get called up to go to Vietnam?'

Regan laughed.

'That's the difference between you and me. My glass is always half full.'

'Yeah alright. It's easy to say that, but what if you just get unlucky.'

'You make your own luck, my son.'

Connor shrugged.

'How many dates they drawing out tonight anyway?' Regan asked.

'It's only thirty now. Was ninety odd back when they started.'

'See what I mean?'

'Thirty is one in twelve. That's tighter odds than you'd get on the horses.'

'Half the probability that both of us will go then isn't it?'

Connor smiled.

'Yep. Twins with different birthdays. Born either side of midnight. Mum would always say that you were the difficult one that refused to come out.'

'Do you remember she used to call me a pumpkin? Cause I appeared at midnight like in Cinderella.'

'Oh, I always thought it was cause of your looks.'

Regan gave him a gentle shove, sending the tower of coasters collapsing down onto the table.

'You coming over or what?' Connor asked.

Regan shook his head.

'Suit yourself then'

Connor took a sip of beer and shuffled across to stand in front of the television sat. It atop a cabinet displaying medals and other items of war memorabilia. Elsewhere in the club, games of billiards and darts were interrupted and the buzz of conversations quietened as people moved in front of the screen. Some pulled chairs over or like Connor jockeyed for a standing position alongside the leaners. He surveyed the crowd. There were people of all ages in the room, but he could easy pick out the blokes who were the same age. A young bloke with curly blond hair sat quietly, surrounded by his

family, anxiety etched across his faces. A group of guys stood around one of the leaners, moving restlessly from one foot to the other or sipping at their beers, boisterous laughter covering their nervousness.

The camera panned back from the Coat of Arms as the music, an instrumental of the national anthem, faded. A couple of oldies shouted for the sound to be turned up, even though no one had said anything yet. Others made shushing noises but the crowd was already falling silent.

A series of men in suits and military uniforms congregated around a round cage sat on a table. The cage was filled with white marbles. On one side of the table was a numbered board, like you'd see alongside the prize wheel at a school fair.

A tinny voice from off screen got proceedings underway.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, the Minister for the Army, the Right Honourable Malcolm Fraser.'

A tall man wearing a dark suit stood and solemnly stepped forward, removing speaking notes from his breast pocket.

'This is the eleventh National Service ballot. By the authority vested in the government under the National Service Act of 1964' he began, and continued to read through a lengthy preamble in a monotone, citing the legal basis for conscription, the justifications for it, and stressing the binding nature of the ballot.

'Yeah we get it' said one old bloke. 'If they draw your number out it ain't no Happy Birthday.'

'Yeah, you're fucked' added someone, eliciting chuckles from some and shushes from others.

Regan appeared at Connor's shoulder.

'Move over'

'Thought you weren't interested? Get a bit lonely over there did you?'

'Half these old buggers think it's a bingo draw. You wait till someone jumps up all excited, starts looking for their frozen chook.'

The distracted chatter that had risen in volume during the Minister's opening address subsided as he took his seat. A man seated at the desk turned a handle to spin the wire mesh basket. The sound of the marbles made a tinny rattle that was oddly festive. The man stopped spinning the handle and the cascade of marbles settled with a series of clinks like a slow drip.

A second man leaned across and opened a trapdoor at the bottom of the cage and removed a single marble. He then handed it to a third man who read what was inscribed on it.

'April 7th'

There was a general murmur from the room, but no strong reaction that would indicate the date chosen belonged to anyone there, or close friends or family. Then again, thought Connor, it might be a bad look to show you were upset. It could be considered unmanly not to want to fight for your country, especially at the Returned Services club.

Connor wondered what his reaction would be if his number was called.

Would he actually be upset?

'March 1st. May 22nd. January 22nd.'

The dates were written down on the board. Numbers one to thirty, top to bottom.

The basket continued to spin then stop. Spin then stop. More dates were read out.

'May 31st. June 19th. March the 15th.'

'Fuck.'

It was the young bloke with curly blond hair. He got up from his seat and walked away from his family.

'Jimmy. Wait.'

The girl jumped up and ran after him. She grabbed him and pulled him in close. His upper body heaved. Connor couldn't tell if they were sobs or just deep breaths. She whispered something in his ear. The parents walked over and joined them, encircling their young, hugging them, tightly and fearfully. Connor looked away.

Would I feel like he did?

The room turned back to the television as the next marble fell.

'May 10th. February 21st. June 23rd.'

Slowly the board filled with numbers. So far there was only the one date drawn in April. The 7th. Connor was the 20th. He didn't know if this was a good omen or not. But he was in the clear. For now at least.

His stress level should have lessened with each marble drawn. But as the odds got longer the tension actually increased. Connor felt tightness across his chest and his palms were clammy. He drummed his fingers on the table. Regan in contrast looked bored, and blew smoke rings above his head.

Three slots left on the board. Three marbles to be drawn from the cage. The final three dates.

'January 6th. June the 23rd.'

The announcer squinted at the last ball.

'And the final date is...April...'

The announcer coughed.

C'mon for fucksake.

'Excuse me' he cleared his throat. 'The final date is April the 21st.'

Connor hung his head back and sucked in a deep breath. A wave of feeling coursed through his body. He wasn't sure if it was relief or something else.

Then suddenly it struck him.

April the 21st was his brother's birthday.

Regan had been drafted.

He turned to Regan but he wasn't there.

Thirteen

The room became narrow.

Everything shifted to the periphery, a blur of colour and noise.

Regan's eyes could only see one thing. A single white marble. He didn't think it was possible to hate one little glass ball so much.

The army man was still talking. But only two words looped over and over in Regan's head.

Two words. A month. A number.

April Twenty-one.

The army man's voice echoed in Regan's ears but he could no longer see his face, his features dissolved, the image on the television frozen in time. The set, with its bulky wooden frame, was just another old photo, like those spaced out along the walls of the RSL. Nameless soldiers in sepia tones, once young, now forgotten.

He wants to get as far away as possible. From the television. From the army man. From those two words.

As Regan began to move his surroundings returned. Images and sounds faded in and out like a crappy radio signal. The clink of glasses. The scratching flint of a cigarette lighter, a flash of flame. A smile, a laugh, voices a low drone. The bleep and clunk of the pokies, whispering bullshit promises. The green felt of pool tables.

A glass dropped to the floor. Regan felt a spray of liquid. A chair fell backwards. A woman cried out a complaint. His shoulder met another and shoved it aside. His arm extended to clear another obstacle from his path.

A voice confronted him

'What the fuck's your problem?'

He doesn't reply. His jaw is wired closed, his fists bound to his sides. It is with them he wants to speak. But there was a voice in his head. Maybe it was Hilda? *Not here Regan.*

Take it outside.

He kept walking.

'Arsehole'

At the entrance doors he released his clenched fists with difficulty, like old engine parts they had rusted and seized. He grabbed the handle with both hands, gripping it too tightly, enjoying the feeling of the sharp metal cutting into his palms. He shoved the door hard, sending it flying back into the wall. Then again. And again. Finally he released it and stepped into the night, a hot coal thrust into water. Skittering, hissing, cracking, out of control.

Outside it was quiet and cool but the calm night did nothing to dampen the rage burning within Regan. It built incessantly, becoming frantic like an insect caught inside his head, panicked, gnawing at his brain.

His eyes searched the street. There was nothing or no-one to take his anger out on. He was a pressure cooker with a faulty valve.

He began to walk, taking long purposeful strides. He leaned forward, muscles taunt from his head through his neck. Down his arms all the way to his fists.

It really shouldn't have been a surprise. Shitty cards, that's what he'd been dealt all his life. He'd fought back from one setback after another. It started before he was born. You can't choose your parents, and his were drunks, losers. With his upbringing he shouldn't have grown up to be anything better than they were. And whilst he wondered now whether their deaths were a blessing, it meant at age eleven he and Connor had been left to fend for themselves. Up to then it wasn't much of a family but it was better than nothing. They'd been shipped off to that God-awful school where the Brothers had it in for him, and no one wanted him as a friend any more than he wanted them. Then he was kicked out of school and sent to Sydney, aged seventeen, unemployed with no qualifications.

Despite it all he'd seized the opportunity to become someone. Someone his parents wouldn't recognise. Someone those cunts from school would have to look up to. To envy. To fear.

Regan reached the end of the street and stopped. There was only the beach ahead of him. An easterly was pushing in a wild surf that roared angrily in his ears, competing with the low rumble coming from deep within himself. A light drizzle began to fall.

He stood rigid at the kerbside, rocking from toe to heel. Reaching his hands up to his face he began rubbing his eyes hard, forcing his thumbs into his eye sockets until he could feel his eyeballs stinging and beginning to water. He pushed his fingers along his skull, feeling the brittle pomade fracture apart as grabbed he grabbed thick handfuls of

his hair, for once not caring about ruining his hairstyle. He pulled hard until he could feel tufts of hair straining to hold on to his scalp, the nerve endings singing out with the pain.

He let out a growl, the low groan of a weightlifter rising from a crouch. It felt good and blocked out the noise in his head. He took a deep breath and growled again, letting his noise compete with the boom of the crashing waves, meeting its crescendo with equal violence.

He roared until his breath had gone. The effort forced him up onto the balls of his feet, his head rolling back, the veins on his neck bursting through the skin.

The last of the yell escaped as a hoarse rasp from his throat. He swayed back onto his heels and let his chin fall down to his chest as he gasped greedily for air to refill his lungs.

He stood silently for a moment, swaying from heel to toe, eyes closed, breathing deeply in and out. He could feel his hair, released from the grip of the pomade, swirling crazily in the wind.

A car stopping in front of him but he ignored it, keeping his eyes tightly closed.

He yelled again. This time his ragged vocal chords emitted something that sounded high pitched and strangled. Its failure to resonate generated even more anger within him.

At the sound of a car door slamming he opened his eyes.

His vision took a moment to arrive back. As it cleared he made out the blue and white stripes of a police car parked on the street opposite him. The car was empty. Its occupant was striding across the street towards him.

In the glow of the streetlights he could make out the young officer's face. It was tight with anxiety, betraying the confidence of his stride.

The cop cleared his throat.

'What the hell's going on here mate?'

Regan smiled.

His fists were heavy. Blunt like dumbbells. He leaned forward with his chest, and took three steps into the street.

Outside the club a light rain was falling.

The old woman who exited the club in front of Connor paused on top step to light a cigarette before pulling her coat over her head and scurrying off into the night. A kid on a skateboard sped past, its wheels graunching against the concrete.

Connor squinted up and down the road, but apart from the woman and the skater the street appeared deserted.

He turned and walked back up the steps, intending to continue his search for Regan inside the club, when he heard the scream. It was low and wild and was coming from the direction of the beach. It sounded like a war cry.

Connor began to run.

The shoes he wore were unsuitable for running. They crushed his toes and bit into his heels. With every footfall pain shot through his bruised abdomen. But still he ran as fast as he could. When the livery of the police car came into view he ran even faster.

In the shadows cast by the streetlights he saw its door swing open. *Stay in your car mate*. He wanted to shout the warning but he was too far away to be heard. The policeman walked into the middle of the road.

It was then he saw his brother stepping off the curb. Connor couldn't see his face but somehow he knew he would be smiling.

'Regan! Regan!'

The hard soles of Connor's shoes smacked against the pavement, echoing off the buildings, the beat of jungle drums.

Regan did not seem to hear. He didn't pause or look around.

The young cop held one hand out while the other fumbled at the baton clasped to his belt. Connor was close enough to hear him speak, his voice crackling with tension.

'Stay where you are!'

Regan continued to walk slowly towards him.

Connor was within ten yards now, but only a couple of feet separated his brother from the cop. He ran blindly onto the street, aiming at a point somewhere in the middle of the collision course.

He made contact just as Regan began to bring his arm back. Connor wrapped himself tightly around his brother's upper body in a bear hug, pinning Regan's arms to his side. A ball n all tackle. Making contact with a low body position he was able to scoop Regan off his feet, half dragging and half carrying him away from the cop in one smooth movement.

Like a captured beast Regan thrashed and twisted to free himself, but Connor held on tight. Tripping over the kerb on the far side of the street finally separated the two-man scrum. They fell sprawling onto the spongy grass of the beachfront reserve.

Connor fell on his hands and knees and was able to spring up quickly, pouncing on top of Regan who was on his back, pinning him down. He used his shins to shackle Regan's flailing legs, anchoring him to the ground.

Connor turned his head back to see that the young copper was walking tentatively towards them, having finally freed his baton which he was holding out in front of him like a fencing sword.

'Please mate, stay back' Conner yelled out at him. 'Just give me a minute to calm him down'.

The cop looked relieved, lowered his baton and nodded his assent.

Connor turned back to Regan who was still squirming underneath him.

'What the *fuck*! That's a cop you were about to whack. Do you want to go to prison or something?'

Finally he felt the wild energy release from Regan's body. His head rolled back to rest on the grass. When he spoke he was deflated.

'What's the difference? Vietnam or prison. I might as well flip a fuckin coin.'

Connor rolled off and lay on the grass beside him.

'Only missed it by five days myself. We were all sat down the station until five minutes ago, watching the draw. Bloody nerve wracking, hey?'

Connor nodded. 'Yeah, copping that on top of our grandma's funeral, it was too much. Normally he wouldn't hurt a fly'.

Constable Davies, or Stu as he asked Connor to call him, reverted back to a more serious expression, his official police face.

'Yes well there's no excuse for behaviour like that really, whatever the personal issues. Assault of a police officer is a very serious crime.'

'You're absolutely right Stu, he's a bloody idiot. Sorry to have put the shits up you'

Constable Stu forced a laugh.

'Well I was only concerned for his safety, not mine. We're trained to deal with all sorts.'

'Oh yeah, of course.'

'I suppose that sort of aggression will serve him well over there. Not that he looks too keen to go.'

'Haven't met too many blokes that are' Connor said.

'Really depends on where your life's at I spose. I mean if you're not up to much, just bumming around then why not go? I've got a couple of mates up home were just doing labouring work and jumped to it. I mean, good pay, bit of an adventure. Wouldn't be all bad would it?'

Connor nodded thoughtfully.

'Yeah. My best mate Steve just signed up to go. *Better than treading water*. That's what he said'

The squawking of the police radio summoned Constable Stu to the patrol car. As he leaned in the window Connor turned and looked down towards the beach. He could make out the silhouette of his brother walking along the shoreline. The surf reared up and crashed down, looking as if it would engulf him, but each time the solitary figure re-emerged from between the breaking sets of waves.

'Car crash. Always happens when it rains. I'd better go.'

They shook hands.

'Thanks for being such a good bugger about all this.'

'No worries. You just tell your brother to keep his nose clean.'

Connor carefully placed his shoes at the foot of the steps that led down to the beach, and folded up his trousers to above the knee. As he laboured through the sand he saw one of his brother's shoes discarded in the middle of the beach. There was no sign of the other one. Connor reckoned he might be still wearing it.

He reached the wet sand. It clung to his feet and ankles as he made his way down towards the foaming sea.

Waves were crashing in around Regan, the force of the foaming white water pushing his brother back to shore. His pants were soaked right up to the waist. When the water receded Regan would veer back towards the sea, as if he didn't realise another wave would follow the last. Finally he turned and began wading back through the shallows.

'Collecting the mail' Regan shouted.

'What?'

'Collecting the mail. That's what I was doing two years ago.'

He stomped up the slope of the beach to where Connor stood at the high tide mark.

'Now I'm in on the big deals. I'm *part* of it. I'm getting to understand how things work in this city.'

He stabbed a finger over in Connor's shoulder.

'Now what? I get to spend two years standing guard over a fuckin rice paddy while someone else steps into my place'.

Reaching into his pocket he removed a cigarette, lit it, and took a long drag.

'I'm not a fuckin coward, that's not it. I've just got an opportunity right now to become something. To become *somebody*.'

'I'll go.'

Regan's head snapped round as if someone slapped him.

'What? What did you say?'

'I said I'll go.'

Regan laughed.

'Are you fuckin mad? What do you mean you'll go?'

'I'll go. In your place.' He nodded and looked Regan straight in the eye. 'I'll go in your place. I mean why wouldn't I? I'm one of those guys aren't I? Treading water.'

'Treading water? What guys? What are you talking about? You haven't thought about this.'

'No you're wrong. I've been thinking about it a lot. I was imagining what my reaction would have been if it was me, not you. How I would have felt if my birthday was called. And you know what it would have been?'

Regan shook his head.

'Relief. I would felt been relief.'

Regan was scratching his head and had started pacing back and forth. He spoke rapidly.

'I spose they wouldn't check too closely. I mean, they'd be used to people pulling a swifty to get *out* of going, not trying to get in.'

Connor looked off to the horizon, rising up and down with incoming swell.

'It's not like I'll miss going to work at the mill...'

'Shit, even if they ask for photo id, we're *identical* twins!'

'The pays roughly double what I'm getting. And hell knows we need it.'

'If we need to alter some documentation I know a guy in Leichardt that can forge anything you want with two or three days' notice.'

'Lucinda is so young, too young. She won't even notice I'm gone. I'd need you to look out for her, and Rose. When I'm gone that is.'

Regan stopped pacing.

'Of course mate.'

He smiled.

'Of course I'll look after them.'

Fourteen

The autumn storms had finally moved in from the south, bringing cold and rain.

The wind came first. It howled through the dunes and made spirals of sand. Along the length of the estuary it gathered speed. The white caps on the water's broken surface salted the air. It gusted across the flat coastal plain, lifting up dust in bilious sheets of red. The wind buffeted the paint-bare cottage, rattling window panes and causing the old timber weatherboards to groan.

In the yard trees bent and shook. Leaves were lifted off branches. They would soar upwards before spiralling slowly to earth. Some would drape themselves in the gutters of the rusty iron roof, or flutter to take refuge under the front porch, clinging to one last opportunity to display their simple beauty before rotting away to nothing.

The smoke that emerged from the chimney was visible for only an instant before it was snatched away and dispersed into a million particles. Rose had got the pot belly stove cranking early in anticipation of Connor's return. In a cast-iron pot a leg of mutton bubbled away in its juices, the aroma warming the house. Even though it was still a little shy of five o'clock the table was already set. An old sheet made do as a table cloth. An empty beer bottle had a single candle wedged into its neck.

In the bedroom the orange paisley dress had been laid out neatly on the bed. Rose had already tried it on once that day. Now she wore an old shirt of Connors over her jeans.

She would wait until she heard Connor return before putting it on, anxious to keep clean while she made her preparations in the kitchen.

It became colder as she walked away from the pot belly, along the corridor to the sitting room at the front of the house. She peered out the window and down the long straight drive to the road. The rain had stopped momentarily but the sky remained angry and black. The train from Sydney arrived into Grafton at four-thirty, but she had no idea how long it would take Connor to hitch a ride back. In these parts it would be rare for three cars to pass without one of them containing someone you knew. But on a night like this not many would venture out. She hoped he would be able to get a ride all the way home. It was not the weather to be walking from the main highway.

Rose thought back to the first time she made that walk. Her face was streaked with moisture, but there was no rain that day. It had taken over an hour to walk from town and by the time she arrived her tears had dried. She didn't want to look like a complete mess for Connor, nor for Steve, then his flatmate, the two of them having moved into the ramshackle house together as soon as they received as their first pay check from the mill. But soon after she had arrived the tears had started again. Connor took her by the hand and they had walked out along the row of eucalyptus trees. She had blathered on about going to the doctor, and what her mother had said. They had almost reached the estuary when she glanced up to Connor's face, his expression making it clear he had no idea what she was talking about. Then she couldn't say the words, and she cried and cried without being able to speak and he looked bewildered, but had pulled her into his chest and held her tightly in his arms all the same.

She wasn't even sure if she was crying for herself then, or for him.

The glass became frosted from her breath. She leaned away from the window and drew a smiling mouth and eyes around the impression that her nose had left. Under it she wrote 'Welcome Home', writing backwards so the words could be read from outside. When finished she looked at her handiwork. To her dismay she discovered both e's were round the wrong way. Maybe it would have been easier to write 'Thank you'. Or just 'Sorry'.

She peered down the drive again. It was getting dark outside, and she figured it was unlikely Connor would read her greeting anyway. She wiped her sleeve across the glass and rubbed the smiley face away.

She went to the bedroom to check on Lucinda. She too seemed excited about Connor's return. Rose began playing with her. She leaned forward into the crib, cradling the child beneath her, gently tickling Lucinda's nose with her own. Her hair was untied and it fell down around Lucinda's face like a veil. Then she unfolded and stood up quickly, bringing Lucinda up with her. 'Do you want to go higher' she asked, to which Lucinda responded with a joyous giggle and she lifted the child as high as her arms could reach. She walked round the room, letting Lucinda fly in the clouds of the ceiling. Without warning she dropped her hands away, letting Lucinda free fall a few inches before catching her and swinging her around, swooping across the bed and gliding in and out of the furniture like a bird as her daughter shrieked with pleasure.

They had been playing for several minutes when she heard the back door open. She glanced down at the dress. No time to slip it on now, she would have to sneak back in here and do it in a minute or two.

'Daddy's home!' she said to Lucinda. 'You want to go see daddy?'

She wrapped Lucinda in her cardigan and walked out to the kitchen.

Connor stood in the doorway. He bag was sitting on the floor and he was running his hands through his hair, pulling his sodden fringe away from his face. He was soaked through, and looked exhausted.

'Here's my favourite girls' he said with a half-smile.

'Do you have a kiss for daddy, Lucinda?'

Rose lifted her up to Connor's face and he blew a raspberry on her cheek, causing her to erupt into another fit of giggles. Rose leaned in and Connor kissed her lightly, the contact fleeting. She reached her free arm around his back and pulled him in to her. She couldn't be sure but thought he winced slightly when she squeezed.

'Pissing down out there' he said.

'Let me get you a towel. Sit down.'

Rose put Lucinda down in her crib, and returned with a towel. She stood behind Connor and dried his hair, slowly and softly rubbing the towel into his head.

'Hmmm, that feels good' he said. She could feel the tightness in his neck and shoulders. Tilting her head she looked at the side of his face and reached a hand out to touch his cheekbone.

'What happened here?'

'It's nothing. Just a graze.'

'I mean how did you get it?'

Connor shrugged.

'Just a misunderstanding with some doormen at a pub. Reckoned we'd had enough, we thought differently.'

Rose shook her head and let out an exasperated sigh.

'That's just typical. Two years apart from Regan and there's none of this bullshit. Two days with him and look what happens.'

'Yeah well, the bouncers down there are dickheads.'

'Regan's the dickhead. And you.'

'Me? Why are you calling me a dickhead?'

'Because every time you let him drag you down into the shit. I told you.'

'He's actually doing pretty well for himself down there I'll have you know. Driving round in a brand new Holden.'

'Oh yeah? Who'd he steal that off?'

'Why do you automatically assume he stole it? He's working down there, earning good money.'

'Doing what? Selling drugs? Running prostitutes?'

'Don't be silly. He's in the property game. Straight up.'

'Your brother's never been straight up in his life.'

Connor pushed her hands off his shoulders and turned to face her.

'There's something I need to tell you.'

'What? You want to move to Sydney and become a crim like your brother?'

Connor thumped his hand on the table. The plates and cutlery jumped; a fork bounced onto the floor.

'Listen. This has nothing to do with Regan. It has to do with me. Us.'

Rose crossed her arms around herself and tucked her hands under the bottom of her shirt. She found the stretch marks that had come along with Lucinda and absently traced her fingernails down their length. The touch of her fingers cold against her skin sent a shiver along her flanks.

'I've been drafted' Connor said simply.

'What?'

'The conscription lottery was on last night. On the TV. They called up my birthdate, April twentieth. There'll be a letter arrive in a couple days but I know what it'll say. I'll

have to turn up at the Town Hall in Grafton to register. Then a few weeks after that I'll go away.'

Rose pursed her lips. They quivered. She wasn't sure what to say.

'But... but you're a dad. And a husband. Surely you can get an exemption?'

'They only grant exemptions on medical grounds, or if you're a uni student. Young fathers can apply for their call up to be deferred but not to be exempted.'

'Well surely you'll apply for that then?'

'What's the point? It's only a deferment; I'd still have to go away within a couple of years.'

'The point is that in a couple of years the war might be over.'

'And in a couple of years Lucinda will be old enough that she might miss me.'

'She'll miss you now. We'll miss you now.'

Rose could feel the heat behind her eyes, the tears close. She spoke softly now.

'Please don't go Connor. We need you here. Please think about us.'

Connor stood and shook his head.

'I've thought about it already. We need the money. And the country needs its men to stand up, not shirk their responsibilities. I've made my decision. I'm going to go. I'm sorry.'

Connor reached out for her, but she shoved him back, hard; his backside bumping into the table. The beer bottle teetered for a moment then tipped over. The unlit candle broke in half.

'Now look what you've done' she said, and snatched the candle from the table, carrying it from the room. She didn't want him to see her cry.

'Rose' he said but didn't follow her

In the bedroom she stood by the bed looking down at her new dress. She watched her teardrops fall on it. They soaked into the fabric, making the orange change colour and go darker. As if the droplets were blood not tears.

After she had dried her tears she lifted the dress and hung it out of sight at the very back of the wardrobe.

Winter

Fifteen

First, pieces of the jungle would splinter. Tiny green explosions.

Bark leapt off a tree trunk. Leaves shattered into shards of green. The jungle floor would move with a dull thud, as if hit by a spade, exposing the red earth that lay beneath it, spraying dirt in miniature dust storms.

Only then would they hear the crack of rifle fire, a hollow pop like fireworks.

Men shouting.

Get down take cover incoming fire.

Connor threw himself to the ground, the damp of the jungle floor filling his nose and mouth as he buried his head. The distant firecrackers were joined by closer ones as his unit opened up. Connor had no sense which direction the enemy fire was coming from, but like the other men he twisted around and pointed his rifle. Fumbling with the safety he began shooting.

'Mullins is hit, Mullins is hit' someone shouted from his left.

He squeezed the trigger. Bursts of three or four rounds, like he was shown in training. Changing his line of fire between each burst as if he had some idea of a target. More shouting. The CO this time. Trying to co-ordinate the counter attack.

'Muzzle flashes three o'clock. Just below the ridgeline, north of the saddle.'

Connor was surrounded by trees with long tendril creepers, and could not see the ridgeline. About half the unit had emerged from the jungle into a clearing of long grass when the first shots rang out. He pulled himself up to a crouch and ran forward to join the others the edge of the clearing, diving in behind a shrubby clump of trees as more metal thudded into the ground to his right.

The radio operator was shouting their co-ordinates into the handset.

'Two-Seven-Zero. Two-Seven-Zero. Air support requested' he yelled.

He looked to his left and could see the men lined up, Taylor, Vaughn. Jeffries and Bell, taking cover in the trees at the edge of the clearing. They crouched low, rifles pointed at the hills to the north. Connor adjusted his helmet so it sat low over his eyes. One of the conscripts that was killed in their first week had worn his helmet at a jaunty angle and was shot neatly in the middle of his forehead. Peering out from under its metal rim Connor began to fire as the CO had directed, straining through the rifle sight to see any muzzle flashes.

Five minutes later he heard the CO. 'Cease fire! Cease fire!'

The rifle fire continued to ring in Connor's ears after the last round was fired. Then, slowly, the sounds of the jungle returned. The sounds of birds and animals. The shuffle and squeak of plants moving against each other. Normality returned, or at least Connor's new version of normality.

The men gathered in a circle. Some smoked cigarettes. Others cleaned dirt from their rifles or reloaded ammunition. No-one spoke.

Soon jets swooped low over them, flashes of silver in the sky. The screams of their engines echoed through the valley, shortly joined by the boom of munitions dropped on the far hillside, destroying positions now likely abandoned.

The CO and Sergeant sat separate from the men, an ordinance map spread between them. The radio operator joined them, relaying strategies between them and a voice from a distant command centre.

Connor stood and walked away from the group, into the long grass of the clearing. It was nearing dusk and the falling sun was lighting up the tendrils of smoke that hung over the hillsides in streaks of orange and purple. Black smudges of charred earth smouldered.

The body of Mullins was left lying where he fell in the long grass of the clearing. Someone had spread a jacket over him. Connor wondered whose jacket it was.

He could hear the Sergeant's voice now.

'We wait here for the evac chopper. For Mullins. They told us their flight time back to base puts them outside daylight flying hours. So we camp here tonight. We'll do it in silence. No campfires tonight gentlemen'

A few of the men groaned.

'Cold rations, yum' one murmured.

'The enforced silence starts now thank you men' the Sergeant said, then read through the roster of the men on sentry duty. Connor got second watch, 19:00 hours until midnight.

The men dispersed, clearing small squares of bush to erect their tents.

As darkness descended on the camp they sat eating cold rations. Connor found it strange that the men still sat in a circle, despite the absence of a fireplace. Maybe it was habit, or they could see the campfire in their minds eye, imagining its warmth, its glow lighting up each other's faces.

Connor saw a campfire. But it was not the damp crackle and smoulder of wet Vietnamese wood. His fire was in Yamba, a stretch of white sand surf beach he took Rose and Lucinda in the week before he left home. He borrowed a car and tent and pulled his surfboard out from under the house. They set up in a clearing in the scrubby teatree, just a short walk through the dunes onto the beach.

Connor surfed on that first day then sat on the beach minding Lucinda whilst Rose had a go. After an hour playing in the wet sand then running screaming away from the incoming surf the little girl tired and he had put her down to sleep under a sun shelter made with driftwood and a towel.

Then he waded out to meet Rose.

He could tell she was exasperated by her unsuccessful efforts to stand and was ready to give up. She made to slide off the board and give it back to him before he stopped her. The water was shallow enough for Connor to stand alongside, the incoming swell picking him up then gently placing him back onto the soft sand of the seafloor. He walked her along to the right spot on the beach, where the waves were breaking cleanly left to right as they came in off the deeper water beyond the point. There, he

guided the surfboard onto the face of a forming wave, saying little by way of instructions, just softly breathing, urging her on.

'Go, go, go Rose... Go!'

The board picked up speed and he couldn't stay with it, the tail the only part visible as it dropped away down the face of the wave, before it too disappeared.

Then, suddenly, she was up. Connor heard shrieks of joy before he saw her head and shoulders pop up from behind the wall of foaming water. She threw her hands up in triumph and twisted around to smile back at him, their eyes meeting, sharing the moment. Before he could shout at her to turn around, to keep going she had lost her balance and was off. But it was enough. She was surfing and when she paddled back to him he could see it etched on her face, the pure unadulterated joy of catching a wave.

Up until then she had been cold with him; the frost that had set in on the night of his return from Sydney had continued over the following weeks. But after that first ride she had softened, warmed. It was as if surfing that wave had brought her back to life in its most simple form, without complications, without worries about the future.

That night Connor scoured the beach for driftwood and got a fire going. They sat close, to the fire and to each other, entranced by its glow, speaking a little, but mainly silent, gazing into the twisting vortex of flames.

'Five minutes'

It was the Sarge's voice, a hoarse whisper in his direction.

Connor reached into his pocket and took out his wallet, now dog-eared and misshapen, its black leather sticky from the dampness of the jungle. He opened it and held it up to the moonlight, trying to make out the shape of Rose and Lucinda looking back through the scuffed plastic sleeve. He could only make out the faintest outline of their faces.

He closed his wallet and wedged it back into his pocket then reached for his rifle.

He spent a moment searching for his water canteen in the darkness, then slithered up to the ridgeline.

Sixteen

'I want to go north, Regan my son, to a land of opportunity they call the Gold Coast.'

Regan and William James sat opposite Frank Sheldon on one side of his oversize marble-topped desk. All three smoked cigarettes. A halo of blue smoke hung over them.

Regan cleared his throat.

'When will you leave?'

Frank Sheldon's forehead, usually a broad expanse of shiny pink skin creased as he leaned forward to peer at Regan with a perplexed expression.

'I'm not going there *personally*,' he said with a chortle, the idea of transporting himself such a great distance was preposterous, 'but you Regan are' he continued with a smile. 'Sheldon Investments has acquired a significant plot of land, prime beachfront land. This land is about to be re-zoned for high-intensity residential. You know what that means don't you Regan?'

Regan nodded stiffly, and was hugely relieved when his boss continued without waiting for him to speak.

'High rise. They're good bastards these Gold Coast councillors. Forward thinking. They're building a brand new metropolis right there on the sand dunes and swamp. The land's dirt cheap and the council are turning around consents within a month'

'A month!' said Regan, seizing the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. 'That's incredible. In Sydney the bastards can take up to six.'

William James shot him a derisive look, reproaching him for stating the obvious, but Frank Sheldon seemed to appreciate his enthusiasm.

'Here in Sydney it's the developers versus the council. In the Gold Coast the developers *are* the council.'

Regan smiled eagerly. William James glanced at his watch.

'So what do you need me to do boss? Are there tenants on the land that need moving on?'

'No the land's bare. You won't even need Elias for this one.'

Regan pursed his lips, a little affronted at the implication that he relied on Elias for anything of a physical nature.

'What I need is someone to deliver instalment payments for the council, to get our consents through quick smart.'

'Couldn't you post a cheque?'

Both Sheldon and William James erupted in laughter and Regan smiled with them, though he wasn't sure what he said was that funny.

'I thought you said they were straight up?'

'I said they were good bastards, I never said they were straight up. Of course they're not straight up. They need to be paid off just the same as any council. What I mean is

that they're *developers*, they speak the same language that I do: dollars and *sense*' he tapped the side of his temple with a podgy, ring-encrusted finger.

'You are to run an errand for me Regan my son. I need you to take the first part payment to a Mister Ray Murdoch, head of Planning at the G, triple C.'

Regan looked blankly back. Frank Sheldon beamed, enjoying himself thoroughly.

'The Gold Coast City Council. Get with the programme Regan, get with the programme.'

Sheldon turned to his accountant.

'Mister James, have you been to the bank?'

Everyone that worked for Frank Sheldon knew that bank he referred to was not the Bank of New South Wales. Sheldon dealt mainly in cash – for land deals, for builders, for bribes – and vast quantities of it would materialise in the care of William James after a trip to 'the bank'. Regan had often wondered about the whereabouts of his boss's money stash, but had, of course, never dreamed of asking.

'It's all here.'

The accountant leant over to his side, the movement further extenuating the arch in his back. Then straightening he leaned forward and dumped a yellow sports bag with a thud on the desk in front of Regan.

Regan reached forward to open the bag.

'There's no need to look inside Regan' said James. 'Needless to say it is an extremely valuable delivery you are making.'

'Guard it as if your life depends on it Regan...'

Sheldon took a draw on his cigarette before continuing, smiling through the haze of smoke that escaped from the corners of his mouth.

'...because it almost certainly does.'

It was dusk by the time he reached Broken River.

The Holden's motor ticked as it cooled. The hot metallic smell of brake callipers and engine oil.

Regan stretched, lifting both hands above his head and twisting his torso, and gave a low groan as his back and shoulders opened up after the long journey north.

A cloud of dust hung along the length of the drive. It now billowed past where Regan had pulled the car to a halt, as if rushing ahead to the house to warn of his arrival.

The shadows that stretched from the column of gum trees that ran from the road, past the house and down towards the estuary were now taller than the trees themselves. Through their slender trunks a flash of bright blue glowed on the horizon. Elsewhere the sky had turned to a steely grey. In the trees and through the sky birds screeched with urgency.

The old house looked deserted. No light glowed from within. The windows were bare of curtains and the chimney showed no trace of smoke. As Regan walked up the overgrown path blades of grass pulled on the nylon of his trousers. He wondered if he'd come to the right place.

With his fist, then his shoe, he pounded on the front door. Hearing no noise from within, he peered through the window. In the half-light he could see a sitting room sparsely furnished with just three armchairs, none of them matching. There was no carpet or rug to cover the bare wooden floorboards. On the floor next to one armchair sat an upturned book, and an empty tea cup.

After thumping on the door again he tried the handle. It turned, but the door didn't open, even when he dropped his shoulder into it.

'Fuckin things nailed up' he muttered, shaking his head. 'What a dump.'

He found the back door ajar. Standing on the bottom step he pulled the fly screen open.

'Rose?'

He held his breath and listened. Only silence came from inside.

He flipped on the light. The kitchen was clean and sparse. A single plate sat on the drying rack. The soup pot on the stove was cold and almost empty; a few vegetables submerged in half an inch of broth. An apron hung on a nail. Regan let his fingers brush against it.

'Anyone home?'

He lit a cigarette then walked to the front of the house. In the sitting room he picked up the book he had seen through the window. *Wuthering Heights*. He flicked through a few pages before dropping it back down onto the seat of the armchair. *Wordy crap. That Rose did always think she was some kind of intellectual.*

He entered the bedroom but didn't turn on the light. The bed was unmade and he ran his hands along the sheets. The pillow had the indent of Rose's head in the middle of it, and he picked it up and held it to his nose, sniffing for the scent of her. It smelt just as he imagined.

There was a single hair on the pillowcase. When he placed the pillow back he lifted the hair off and wound it around his index finger.

The top drawer of the dresser was filled with her underwear. Nothing frilly or fancy like girls in Sydney would wear, just simple cotton, soft and clean. He looked at each pair of underwear and bra in turn, studying them as if they would reveal a secret, then closed the drawer, not bothering to refold or place anything back as he'd found it.

The other drawers weren't as interesting. Jeans, shirts and jumpers, all folded neatly. Some of hers some of Connors. Nothing new or fashionable.

The awful suit his brother had worn to the funeral was the only thing of his in the wardrobe. Five or six dresses hung neatly on hangers. Most were plain. A couple were in simple floral prints. Right at the back was probably the only thing that any of the woman he knew would be seen dead in, an orange paisley print dress. It was shorter than the rest. *You'd actually be able to see her knees in this, maybe even a little of her thighs.* He sniffed the fabric, but it didn't smell of her.

A low shelf by the window held a dozen or so books. Hard covers, no paperbacks. He picked one up, opened it and read the first few lines out loud.

'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife...'

'What the fuck are you doing here?'

He spun around to see Rose standing in the doorway, the child folded in her arms. She wore baggy blue overalls. A scarf was tied over her hair. Her face was tight, her eyes wide and angry.

Regan calmly took a drag on his cigarette and blew a ring of smoke. He looked her up and down.

'Now you needn't have got all dressed up for me sweetheart.'

'I asked what the fuck you're doing here'

'Now is that any way for a young lady to talk? You and I are more or less family after all.'

'You and I are *nothing*. And I asked what you want.'

'Well if a warm welcome is too much to ask for I'd settle for a cuppa'

He smiled.

'Or something stronger if you're not too uptight to party nowadays'

She eyed him warily as he took another drag on his cigarette. He held it up in front of him.

'Got somewhere I can stub this out?'

She dropped her eyes and turned away, the stalemate broken. Her footsteps were heavy as she withdrew to the rear of the house.

Regan followed a safe distance behind, whistling cheerfully.

Rose managed to avoid eye contact as she busied herself in the kitchen. First she dropped an old saucer on the table for Regan to use as an ashtray, then filled the kettle and set it on the stove. She flipped the element on then carried Lucinda back to the bedroom and put her down.

When she returned to the kitchen Regan spoke in a loud voice, proclaiming to no one in particular that 'a man can get pretty hungry after a long drive to check on his nearest and dearest'.

She didn't acknowledge he had spoken but heated a pan and started to fry two eggs and bread.

Apart from his request for food Regan sat in silence. Rose didn't glance in his direction, but she could feel his eyes following her as she moved through the kitchen, the heat of his stare upon her.

It wasn't until she put a plate of food and a steaming cup of tea in front of him that Rose found she had run out of things to busy herself with. She toyed for a moment with the thought of retreating to the bedroom but instead poured a second cup of tea and pulled out a chair to sit down opposite him.

'Thanks for this Rose' Regan said through a large mouthful of eggs and bread. She glanced up at him, their eyes meeting, hers narrow, his wide and bright.

'I mean I appreciate you feeding me and putting me up even though I just turned up out of the blue.'

She sat bolt upright in her chair. 'Wait just a second, who said anything about putting you up?'

Regan shrugged.

'I'm on my way to the Gold Coast, it's a bloody long way, and I was kind of hoping to get a few hours shut-eye here tonight, then drive the rest in the morning.'

Rose glared at him but said nothing.

'Just till dawn then I'll be on my way again. Got to meet a bloke in Surfers at ten'.

Rose let go of the breath she had been holding. It came out with a snort.

'You don't change do you? Arrive here unannounced and expect to be welcomed like bloody royalty? I've a mind to turf you out on the street.'

'I don't mind sleeping on the couch. It's not like we have to share a bed or anything...'

Regan smiled 'unless you want to.'

Rose pushed her chair back from the table and stood. She could feel heat in her temples, the muscles of her neck and head.

'How do you think Connor would feel, knowing you were here hitting on me while he's away?'

Regan stopped chewing, placed his knife and fork down. He held his palms out towards her as if to ward off a blow.

'Whoa, hang on. I'm just having you on. Don't take everything so damn seriously for chrissake'

When she said nothing Regan picked up his fork, speared a triangle of bread and popped it in his mouth.

'Besides. Connor asked me to check in with you from time to time.'

'I'm sure he didn't mean you coming to stay'

'Rose I was just passing through. Honest. I'll be gone in the morning. Or if it's such a big deal to let me sleep on the couch I'll go tonight, I'll leave now.'

The sound of Lucinda drifted to them from the bedroom, the prickly coughing sound she made that signalled she was about to cry.

Rose, happy for the reprieve, turned and left the room.

Regan was still seated in the same chair when she returned twenty minutes later carrying a pile of blankets, a pillow and a sheet. She dumped the bundle onto the chair opposite him.

'Thanks love, I appreciate it' he smiled at her.

'There's no couch and the armchairs have so many bung springs that you might find the floor more comfortable. Or your car. Either way I don't care.'

Without waiting for his response Rose returned to her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

She took her nightdress from the hook behind the door and stood there, listening to Regan moving through the house. The clank of his plate against the sink. His footsteps in the kitchen, then down the hall. He paused for a moment as he passed the doorway of her bedroom, closer than they had been, only a few inches and the timber of the door separating them. His footsteps continued along the corridor and into the front room. When she heard him close the door she began to breathe again.

When she returned from her walk to the estuary and saw a car sitting parked at the end of the drive her heart begun racing. It was a Kingswood just like the police drove. She felt sick in her stomach, but had forced herself to stand up straight and continue walking to the house.

In her imagination she had played out the scene many times. The local Sergeant arriving to look at her with such sadness in his eyes she would know what he had come to say before he uttered a word. She would pull herself together, invite him inside.

They would drink tea. Talk about the arrangements for the funeral, practical things. He would look at her with kindness that masked a desire to leave quickly and go home. Or go anyplace where grief did not hang so heavily in the air. She would finally excuse herself, not wanting to be alone but knowing that ultimately she must.

Hanging her nightdress on the hook she got into bed still wearing her overalls. She remembered her book, still in the front room, but quickly dismissed any thought of retrieving it.

It was still early, but she turned the lamp off and lay awake in the dark, listening to the noises of Regan from the front room. The faint sound of his whistling.

Her recurring dream started in different places at different times but always ended up in the same place. The sand dunes down at Lighthouse beach.

Tonight Connor was there with her. They were drunk, just as she was that night, but she was in control and Connor stayed by her side as they mingled among the happy crowd. She felt a glow of pride. The quiet bookish girl on the arm of the captain of the rugby team. Her fingers traced the crest on his blazer, his school tie. He wrapped his arm around her waist. Tight. Safe.

They went off together into the dunes, hand in hand. When the noise of the party revellers had been left behind, he laid her down gently on the sand. She felt like a princess being lowered onto her throne. She closed her eyes to savour the kiss which

she knew would follow. But the kiss never came. She thought this was strange but she smiled and laughed, thinking that Connor was playing a game with her.

When she opened her eyes Connor was not with her. She started to feel angry that he was tricking her but then she realised that it wasn't anger at all. It was fear. She could hear a voice that was like his but she didn't want to hear it. The sand was rising. She tried to get up but she couldn't. The indecipherable words spoken in Connor's voice changed to laughter and he laughed and laughed until it was all Rose could hear.

She woke with a start, her breathing short. She didn't know how long she had been asleep. It was dark, the moon was up and full. It shone a square of light onto her bed through the single window of her bedroom. The house was silent. She was still wearing her overalls.

The floorboards were cold under her feet as she tiptoed to the door. Placing her ear to it she listened. For snoring, a drag on a cigarette, or his incessant whistling. But she could hear nothing. Even though she hated the sound of him the silence was worse. She could not place his location which meant he was everywhere. Was he in the front room or the kitchen? Was he just outside the door? Or behind her?

There was no lock so she quietly lifted the chair she used as a bedside table and carried it across the room, wedging it under the door handle.

She got back into bed but it was a long time until her heartbeat slowed and fatigue took over and she fell into a fretful sleep.

In the pre-dawn it was silent.

The sun began to peek above the sand dunes on the horizon, its rays hitting the top of the cottage's rusty iron roof which made a soft pinging sound as the metal began to heat. From the other side of the room Rose could hear Lucinda's raspy breath.

There was no sound coming from the next room.

Staring at the ceiling she thought of Regan, and of Connor.

She wondered how twin brothers – identical twins – could be so alike and yet so different.

Their looks were so similar that at a glance most people would struggle to tell them apart. But if you put them side-by-side, it would become apparent that even though they were the same height, their bodies had grown in different ways. Connor had the broad shoulders and thick torso of a working man, strong rather than muscular. His was a rugby player's build, with the beginnings of a beer-belly to match. Regan on the other hand was sleek, toned. A leaner version of his brother. His dress sense and strut conveyed self-confidence, whereas Connor was softly spoken, even shy when around people he didn't know.

When they spoke, the differences would become even more apparent, even though their voices were nearly identical. It was the tone, the expressions they used, their vocabulary. When Regan spoke it was all swagger. His smile was a smirk, his lips thin,

curling up at the corners of his mouth. When Connor spoke he did so plainly, his words simple, his tone plain. His smile was broad and open.

A spider hung from the lampshade, suspended on a single thread that dropped from the bottom of its web. As she watched it scurried back up into the lampshade to disappear from sight. She was wondering what had startled it when she heard the graunch of a chair on the floor from the front room. A cough, a yawn.

Regan was up.

Rose dressed simply in a pair of jeans and a blouse.

Sitting at the dresser, she took her hair out of the clip she had tucked it into the previous evening. She spent a few minutes combing out the knots then neatly twisted it into a spiral and clipped it back in place. She brushed the sleep out of her eyes and smoothed her eyebrows down. In the cracked mirror she could see her skin had good colour, despite the time of year, and was free of blemishes.

It was rare for Rose to spend any time looking in the mirror. A cursory couple of minutes on those days she caught the bus into town was the only time each week she bothered. The change to her normal routine felt strangely welcome, even if it was brought about by the novelty of a guest she didn't want in her house. Checking her appearance wasn't usually part of her daily routine but it felt good to take a little time and effort.

She concluded that despite grey rings of tiredness under her eyes, with her hair made tidy and wearing a nice blouse she scrubbed up alright.

When she emerged from her room Regan was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette and looking into space. He had neatly folded the blankets and sheets he had slept in and they sat on the same chair she had dumped them on the previous night.

'How did you sleep?' she asked.

Regan looked surprised.

'Yeah, well thanks, really well.'

Rose walked into the kitchen and stood at the stove.

'Well I guess I should be going then, get on the road and all.'

'I thought you'd want some breakfast' she said quickly.

Regan raised his eyebrows.

'Well yeah okay, if you're offering that is'

'I'm offering' she replied, 'but I'm afraid it's only eggs and toast again.'

'My favourite' he said with a smile.

As Rose busied herself at the stove Regan stood up and made a move towards the bedroom. Rose turned and stopped him with a sharp glance.

'I just wanted to have a look at the baby' he said apologetically.

Rose remained silent for a moment, their eyes locked.

She nodded slowly and spoke in a murmur.

'OK'

Regan nodded back and stepped through the doorway. Rose turned back to the stove, intending to continue with the breakfast preparations. Instead she stood still listening for sounds coming from the next room. After a moment she pulled off her apron and walked to the bedroom.

She stood in the doorway. It was clear that Regan hadn't heard her, wasn't aware she was there. He had picked Lucinda up out of her crib and was holding her, cradled along his forearm. With his free hand Regan touched his finger onto the tiny palm of her hand, and he smiled when her fingers gripped, closing around his fingertip. He wiggled his finger up and down, then whispered to her.

'It's nice to meet you Lucinda. How do you do Miss?'

He smiled, not his typical cheeky smirk, but a real smile, simple and honest.

'What a firm handshake you have. Maybe you will be a business woman when you grow up? You look smart, just like your mum, aren't you? And you may not know that your dad..'

'She likes you' Rose said, interrupting.

Regan turned, and smiled, that same honest smile.

'She's a beautiful baby Rose. Takes after her mother. She looks just like you.'

Rose blushed. She was sure that it was the first time Regan had paid her a compliment that felt like a compliment should. She smiled.

'I'll leave you two to keep talking. Your breakfast will be ready soon'

Regan had never held a child.

After Rose left he ran his fingers down the length of her, along her arms, and her legs. He gently lifted each of her fingers and removed one of her booties to look at her tiny feet and toes. He traced the contour of her ears and delicately stroked the faint lines of her eyebrows.

Lucinda seemed to respond to his touch, as if she knew that he was no stranger, that they were linked by blood. She smiled and giggled when his touch tickled her soft skin, and her eyes looked straight into his, as if she could see his entire being through them.

When Rose called to him to breakfast he didn't want to put her down. He kissed her gently on the forehead, breathing in her milky scent.

'See you soon baby Lucinda' he whispered, and placed her down.

Rose laid the plate down on the table and called for Regan again.

A few minutes ago she would have been worried that he hadn't come, would be concerned to leave him alone in there. The bedroom, her sanctuary. Her precious daughter resting in his arms.

But she felt certain that she needn't worry, so she sat at the table and waited. A moment later his footsteps sounded in the hall and he slid into the seat opposite her. On his face was the same goofy smile, and when he looked at her his eyes appeared dreamy, as if he was elsewhere in his mind. She wondered if Lucinda was there with him.

'She's a beautiful baby Rose' he said, ignoring the food in front of him.

'Yeah. I was so frightened to be a mother, but now I can't imagine my life without her in it'

Regan nodded with sincerity, as if he knew exactly what she meant.

When he looked at his watch it was like someone had snapped their fingers. His eyes became narrow and focused.

'Shit is that the time? I have to go.'

He stood from the table and scooped up the key ring that had sat there since the previous evening. He looked around the room, flustered, as if there were something else he needed to do. Rose stood and he looked at her.

'I'm sorry, the time has got away on me. I have to meet this guy at ten you see'

Rose leaned across the table and took the two pieces of toast from his plate and closed them onto each other then wrapped them in a serviette.

'Here, take this. Eggs on toast becomes an egg sandwich. For the road.'

He had taken a step towards the door, now turned back and accepted the food she held out to him. He smiled again, that same new smile she had never seen before.

'Thanks Rose, I really appreciate it. It's been... great. Great to see you, great to see the baby. I'm glad you're doing ok'

He looked down at the bundle of bread and eggs in his hand.

'How will I get this serviette back to you?'

'Dunno' she shrugged. 'Just drop it by next time you pass.'

'Next time. OK, I will. Next time'

He stepped out the door and was gone. A moment later Rose heard the car fire into life, and a crunch of gravel as it began to move away. She stood in the same spot in the kitchen, listening until she could no longer hear him.

The house fell quiet again.

Seventeen

It was a fortnight after Mullins' death, but Connor and his battalion hadn't seen the enemy since. The North Vietnamese were a khaki blur, their shapes barely distinguishable from the sway of a tree branch in the wind.

However invisible, the NVA seemed to be wired in to the mood of the battalion. As if they were omniscient, watching, knowing when to fight and when to hide.

In the days immediately after the fire-fight that killed Mullins the men were full of fury. The taste for revenge rancid in their mouths. The NVA seemed to understand this and withdrew. Like a child hiding to avoid punishment from an enraged parent. As the days became a week, the anger subsided. A sense of frustration pervaded. Locals were stopped and questioned but knew nothing. But the closest they got to their foe was a week old fireplace, some stale human shit and footprints trailing through the mud. Finally the intelligence squawks began to state the obvious, suggesting the enemy troops had slipped the cordon.

Frustration became boredom.

There was speculation the NVA were being hidden by local villagers.

Connor heard their CO on the field radio.

'That's affirmative. We've had two confirmed sightings' he lied. 'Requesting approval to raid the village in pursuit of enemy soldiers. Authorise.'

The voice of the faceless officer at HQ who gave their orders squawked out of the radio.

'Approval granted'

When the CO gave the orders a couple of the men let out a low cheer.

The battalion moved quickly through dense jungle then broke into the open ground above the village. It sat in the saddle of a valley hugging a bend in the stream they had been following. It was separated from their position by a few hundred metres of terraced rice paddies.

The village looked all but deserted. A collection of no more than thirty huts made of packed earth and straw. Thin tendrils of smoke spiralled above the rooftops. Hens strutted in and out of the village's narrow laneways. A dozen goats were held in a dusty pen by the stream, the sound of their low bleating carried on the breeze.

The men descended swiftly down the raised paths running between the rice paddies. They found a group of women bent low, tending to their rice, oblivious to the soldiers' approach. They jumped up and clutched each other, frightened. They forced then to come up out of the knee-deep water. One woman's clucking complaint was quickly silenced by a few sharp words barked at her by the unit's interpreter.

As they rounded a wood pile on the fringes of the village they found of children playing. Four older boys were kicking around the round husk of a dried out coconut. They saw the soldiers and ran, disappearing into the maze of huts before they could be held. Their shouts rang through the village.

'Great, now everyone knows we're here' said the Sarge.

The younger kids were too frightened to run away like the older ones. They looked up at the approaching soldiers, as still as statues, eyes wide.

Connor saw two boys who had been building a sandcastle. They were of the same age and size, their features identical.

'Twins' he mumbled to himself. 'Identical twins'

Connor walked towards them, smiling and holding a hand out in front of him.

'It's okay' he said.

He looked down to see one of the boys had a stream of yellow running down the inside of his legs. It pooled underneath him in a puddle, soaking into the dirt. Another soldier Mike Adams pushed past Connor and grabbed the boys by the back of their necks and herded them away to join the others in a tight huddle on the dirty ground by the goat pens.

'Form a perimeter' the CO barked.

Quickly the Australians fanned out. Half the men trained their rifles on the huts, whilst the others guarded against an attack from the rear.

Leaving the perimeter intact, the Sergeant selected seven men from its line.

'McIntyre, Smith, Adams, Taylor split into pairs and run front and rear as we go through'

'Vaughn, Bell, Thorn you're with me. We go hut to hut. Eyes and ears men, eyes and ears'

Connor fell in behind the Sergeant along with the two Victorians, Tim Vaughn and Angus Bell.

They entered the narrow lane that was the village's only street. A channel had been cut to divert the stream down the centre of it. At points the water branched off to bubble in and out under the thatched sides of the huts, providing basic plumbing.

The men moved slowly, rifle barrels fanned out to all points of the compass.

They stopped in front of the first hut.

The Sarge looked at the group of four men that would provide cover and support.

'We'll tag em, you bag em. Let's go'

He turned to Angus Bell.

'Bell, you and me will take the doorway. Thorn, Vaughn you enter. We will follow you in. Then we swap. Questions?'

They shook their heads.

'Good. Let's go.'

Angus Bell and the Sergeant took their positions on either side of the doorway and pointed their rifles to chest height. The Sergeant nodded and Connor kicked in the door. It was a flimsy thatch-work of twigs and straw and disintegrated on impact.

Connor entered the hut, followed by Tim Vaughn.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloomy interior.

The hut was empty.

They worked their way down the street. Most of the huts were vacant. In a few they found old women. They hunkered in the shadows. Crouched over fires they husked rice or cooking it in earthen pots. Their eyes were wide and fearful. They hugged children tightly into themselves. When the soldiers gestured for them to leave, they would bolt. Like birds released from a cage. They tried to escape into the fields. The soldiers in the lane had a hard time stopping them. Their efforts were almost comical, like a game of vastly mismatched bull-rush. But they were all contained and shepherded to the ever increasing gathering by the goat pens.

It was only as they reached the end of the village that they encountered resistance.

Bell and the Sergeant took their turn. Connor and Vaughn guarded the door. A cooking fire smouldered from inside. With no chimney the smoke escaped out the doorway. The visibility was poor and made the men cautious. Bell and the Sarge crouched low as they entered. Their rifles at their shoulders. They yelled 'Dong Bang! Dong Bang!' Stay still.

Connor heard shouting. The sounds of a scuffle. He shouted to alert the other group of four soldiers. Signalled they were going in.

The huts interior was smoky and dark. It took a moment for Connor's eyes to adjust. He strained to track the shapes moving around in the gloom.

An old man sat on the floor, ancient, at least eighty. Rags for clothes, a long thin beard, his mouth toothless. He babbled incessantly at Bell, trying to drag him to his feet.

A woman. Young, pretty, his granddaughter. She yelled at Bell. Grabbed hold of his sleeve. Tried to pull him away.

The Sergeant held a young boy in a bear grip. He lifted the boy, maybe eleven or twelve, off the ground. The boy's arms and legs kicked out in an attempt to get free.

Vaughn moved first. He grabbed the woman by her tunic. Slung her back and away from the old man. She landed near Connor's feet, sprawling on her back. Crying out in pain.

Somehow the boy managed to twist free. He was quick. He sprang away from the Sergeant's attempt to grab him. He ran towards his mother, a flash in the corner of Connor's eye. His reactions were quick, instinctual. He swung the butt of his rifle around. The sound of a dull thud against the boy's forehead. His legs collapsed beneath him and he crashed onto the dirt floor of the hut.

The woman began to crawl towards her son, forgetting her own pain. The Sergeant grabbed her by the hair and the back of her pants and dragged her outside, her screams piercing the air.

Bell turned back to the old man. He picked up the tiny old man as effortlessly as a sack of potatoes and carried him out to the lane.

The young boy groaned. A gash on his forehead poured blood. It matted his hair. Spread like a glaze over his face.

The Sarge looked back into the hut. First at the boy. Then at Connor. He hadn't moved since striking the boy.

'Get the medic to take a look at him' he nodded in the direction of the boy, then left, leaving Connor alone in the hut with the boy and Vaughn.

Vaughn looked at Connor.

He smiled.

'What this little fucker needs is a lesson in manners, not a medic'

Vaughn began kicking the boy. He rained a flurry of kicks at his torso and head.

The boy curled himself into a ball against the blows. His low whimpers and grunts sounded above the thuds of Vaughn's boots.

Connor watched in silence.

Vaughn finally stopped. He looked up at Connor and grinned, puffing with exertion.

'That should do it' he said.

He picked the boy up by the back of his shirt and threw him into the lane.

As Vaughn walked towards the door to make his exit, he paused by the smouldering fireplace and, as an afterthought, kicked the fire. It exploded into a shower of red embers. They bounced and hung off the banana-leaf wall.

Connor followed him into the lane where one of the soldiers from the other group of four had slung the boy over his shoulder.

Together they headed to join the other soldiers gathered by the goat pens.

Ten minutes later the company stood surrounding the villagers they had gathered up.

The battalion had completed their search. No trace of any enemy soldiers had been found.

The boy was being attended to by the company medic who was putting a line of stitches in the gash on his forehead where Connor's rifle butt had struck him.

The South Vietnamese Army soldier who accompanied their battalion to act as interpreter was talking to the CO.

'They say they know nothing. Not see any North Vietnamese troops.'

The earnestness of their expressions showed the truth of it.

'Are they telling the truth?'

'They stupid farmers. They not know *how* to lie' the interpreter said with a toothy smile. He tapped his forehead. 'Too stupid. Too scared'

Connor watched the villagers' faces open in horror as one by one they saw the fire begin to take hold. It moved quickly across the straw roofs from one hut to the next. They begged the soldiers to do something. Their wailing cries sounding over the crackle and pop of the fire.

Connor walked across to where the Sergeant was now talking with the CO. 'Excuse me Sarge. Should we do something about the fire?'

He looked to the CO who gave a shrug of indifferent.

'We're soldiers Thorn. Not fire fighters' he said and turned away.

Connor walked up to the edge of the rice paddies and watched the red and orange flames leap into the air. The thatched roofs and walls crackled as they burnt. There was a bang, a stash of cooking oil going up. Soon huts began to collapse in on themselves, sending showers of sparks into the sky.

Within ten minutes the fire had destroyed the village. Deprived of fuel to burn it quickly died down and began to smoulder. The smoke got into Connor's eyes. He looked away to the hillside.

The radio crackled and an order was shouted.

The men formed up and moved out, climbing up and out of the paddy fields and back into the jungle.

Connor could hear the crying of the children long after the village fell from view.

Eighteen

Regan received a much warmer welcome on his second visit to the cottage in Broken River. He reckoned part of the problem last time was turning up unannounced, so this time he called ahead. He was on the phone within minutes of receiving his instructions and another yellow sports bag from William James.

He asked politely if it was ok if he stopped in to rest for the night. To his surprise Rose agreed, admittedly with no enthusiasm but with no hint of objection neither.

He rung again from a public phone on route to say that he'd got away earlier than expected and ask if there was anything she wanted him to bring. To his surprise she told him that she had made a trip into Broken River and was preparing a roast. A roast! Regan had smiled at the thought of her going to an effort for him.

As he approached the house he could smell the heady aroma of roast lamb. When Rose opened the kitchen door to let him in he saw that she was wearing a dress with a figure flattering cut. He picked it as the orange number he saw tucked away at the back of her wardrobe.

He stopped short of the steps to look her up and down but quickly realised that his appreciative gaze had not been well received. Rose folded her arms defensively around herself. Realising his mistake Regan quickly looked up to her face.

'That's a pretty dress, it suits you' he said, with as much innocence as he could muster.

Rose left her arms crossed as she ushered him inside.

Wearing the dress was a mistake.

Rose felt nervous when she had tried it on earlier that afternoon, and had changed in and out of it twice before Regan's arrival. She now regretted not listening to her intuition. *What was she thinking?* Seeing Regan eying her like a hungry dog she instantly regretted her decision. She wanted to change then and there back into her dowdiest attire, overalls and a bush shirt, but realised this would only bring more attention to herself.

She shook her head, her face flushing hot at her own foolishness, as she busied herself in the kitchen.

Then, to her surprise Regan was extremely well mannered for the rest of the evening. Charming even. She relaxed in his company. Of course he remained one of the most egotistical men she had ever met, spending most of the time talking about himself. He boasted about his life in Sydney, the work he was doing with the much venerated Frank Sheldon and his plans for the future. But Rose didn't mind so much. She had little exciting of her own to talk about, and was sure that Regan wouldn't be interested in Lucinda's latest utterances or a critique of the novel she reading.

Rose was sceptical as to which aspects of his monologue were true, but regardless, he was a good storyteller and his tales took her into a world that was to her as alien as it was exotic.

Before long she even forgot her anxiety about the dress.

Regan made a mental note to take things slow with her and not do or say anything she might construe threatening.

He determinedly stuck to this the whole night. He uttered no flirty comments or innuendo, and found that as the evening progressed she had relaxed and the conversation between them came more freely.

Then he'd almost blown it as Rose returned from the front of the house and dumped a bundle of sheets, pillow and blankets in his lap.

'I'm sorry I can offer anything better than that crappy armchair. I'm sure it must be uncomfortable'

The words came out before he could stop himself.

'What about that big double bed of yours?'

Her face dropped and she shot him a look of contempt before retreating to her bedroom.

The next morning he'd readied himself to leave quietly. Then, to his surprise she emerged into the kitchen and asked if he wanted to stop in on his way back to Sydney. She made it seem very casual.

'I'll never be able to finish all this lamb up on my own. Be better than a truck-stop pie.'

Regan struggled to contain his delight. It was the first time she had invited him to call, rather than having to invite himself, and he considered it a significant step forward. He readily accepted.

Whilst a small part of him missed spending the afternoon in one of Surfer's many beer gardens, he was genuinely looking forward to spending the afternoon with Rose and Lucinda.

He arrived just after midday, after another successful meet with Councillor Murdoch. It was unseasonably warm for a day in mid-winter. Rose spread a rug out on the lawn at the back of the cottage, and they playing with Lucinda and ate delicious lamb sandwiches washed down with Rose's homemade ginger beer. And they talked some more, but not constantly, and strangely for Regan the silences didn't feel uncomfortable. He found himself looking away in the clear air to the vague outlines of the distant mountains or closing his eyes to enjoy the warmth of the sun and listen to the barely audible roar of the sea.

He must have drifted off, and woke with a start. A small black cricket had jumped up onto his head then bounced into the middle of the picnic rug. Regan brushed his hands through his hair in case there were more. He looked over to see that Rose was laughing. Regan began to laugh too. After their laughter died away to smiles, their eyes locked for a moment before Rose broke away.

Regan leant over, shaking the last drops of ginger beer out of a tall glass and placing it over the insect, imprisoning it. When Regan looked up she was staring at him and he felt the need to break the silence.

'You'll never believe what they have up on the Gold Coast, Rose. They have these girls, meter-maids they call them. Dressed in bikinis, fair dinkim, with little cowboy hats and sashes across them like beauty queens wear. They feed money into the parking meters to stop you getting a ticket'

Rose frowned. 'Why?'

'Sorry?'

'I mean why do they do that? Pay for someone else's parking?'

The cricket jumped up, hitting the inside of the upturned glass with a hollow ding.

Regan scratched at the side of his head.

'I'm not sure. Think it's something to do with the tourism board. Marketing I guess.'

She looked nice today Regan reckoned. Nothing fancy, or course, just a summer frock with a simple floral print. Despite the child, he decided, her body was still pretty tidy. With the sun behind her you could make out the shape of her figure a little. But now the sun had dropped behind low clouds. The wind gusted up a little, blowing leaves down onto the rug. Rose sat up and wrapped a cardigan round her shoulders.

'Why don't you come with me, next time I head up north?'

He pushed himself up on his hands, rolling into a seated position. Cut grass clung to his shirt like confetti and he brushed it off. His eyes, which moments earlier were heavy in the languid stillness of the afternoon, were now bright with inspiration.

'I mean it. I could arrange it so we had a day up there. A day and a night'

Rose didn't reply, her eyes dropping away from his stare.

'You'd love it Rose, seriously. We'd have a ball'

'It's a nice thought. I'd like to take a trip there. Maybe when Lucinda's a little older.

And when Connor's back'

Regan gave a derisive snort, and he saw Rose's eyes narrow.

'Oh shit c'mon Rose. I mean to say, if you're planning a trip with Connor you'll die waiting I reckon.'

Rose began hurriedly tidying the plates and glasses that lay strewn across the picnic rug. Regan tossed an empty glass across at her. It bounced off the ground, sending up a plume of liquid that spotted her frock in a line from the hem to just below her waist.

When she didn't react Regan stood and walked over the rug towards her, hands on hips. His shadow fell over her.

'Don't you get it Rose? You think that Connor will come back and everything will be happy families, trips away to the Gold Coast? You're in fantasy land. He's gonna be back working at the mill, drinking at the pub with his mates, bringing home barely enough for you to get the bus to Broken River once a week, let alone a trip to the bloody Gold Coast. That's if he makes it back...'

She stopped tidying and slowly stood. She met his eye and when she spoke her voice was soft, but there was no mistaking the anger lacing it.

'It's *you* that live in a fantasy world. You think I can just pack up and go for a nice little holiday with my husband's brother, have a night out on the town. Then what hey? Fall into each other's arms? The two of us live happily ever after?'

Regan's face twisted into a scowl.

'You think I would do that?' she continued with a wild grin, her teeth a tight line, her lips thin, tightly pursed. 'You actually think that I would *want* to?'

She laughed, a tinny, hollow sound.

They stood for a moment, facing each other off in silence. When Regan spoke spittle came from the corners of his mouth.

'Well *sweetheart* it's not exactly like you've got a whole lot of other offers. Social diary full is it?' He swept his arms in a wide ark, taking in the paint-bare house, the rusted old barn. 'You always thought you were something, didn't you Rose. Better than the rest of us. Now take a look at yourself.'

She took a step in to him, their faces only inches apart.

'I'm doing just fine here without your help thank you. Just fine. Remember that you were the one who turned up here, playing the poor me.' She scrunched up her face and put on a child's voice. '*Can I have a cuppa? Something to eat? How about a bed for the night?*'

'Well you warmed up pretty bloody quick, seemed happy to have me around. Bit of male company? Probably tuned you on a little did it? Or are you too stuck-up for that now. You always were a bit that way.'

'You're my husband's brother Regan. Nothing more. Given our history you're lucky I let you on the property.'

She bent down and picked up a pile of plates and cups, turned and strode away to the kitchen.

There was one glass left on the rug and Regan kicked it after her. It tumbled end over end before coming to a stop in the long grass. He looked down to see the cricket, released from its glass prison, had sprung onto the polished tip of his shoe.

'Fuck off' he said, and kicked it away.

Rose began washing the dishes. The water was too hot and stung her hands but she didn't add any cold in. She waited to hear the roar of Regan's car starting up, the crunch of gravel spitting off its tyres as he accelerated up the drive.

Instead she heard the screen door squeak open behind her. She looked down and realised she had washed no dishes. She removed her hands, red and swollen, from the scolding water, and reached for a tea towel to dry them before she turned to face him.

Regan stood in the doorway. His head hung down, shoulders slumped forward like the wind had been taken out of him. He looked up at her and was a little boy again, shuffling nervously alongside her in the assembly yard on their first day of school.

'I'm sorry Rose. I didn't mean to say those things. It's just...' he tapered off, unable to find the words, or unwilling to speak them. He took a deep breath before continuing.

'It's just that I like being here. With Lucinda. With you.'

Water and soapy bubbles dripped from Rose's hands, slopping into a pool on the linoleum.

'Regan, I...'

'No Rose let me finish. Please...' he raised himself up taller and took a breath. 'I came here looking for nothing more than a bed for the night and some grub. Maybe the opportunity to give you a hard time'

He smiled, but Rose's expression remained stony. He quickly continued.

'I never had anything like family growing up. You know that. And after spending time here, sitting round talking with you, playing with Lucinda, holding her in my arms'

He paused and took a step into the room.

'Something changed for me Rose. I found something I hadn't had before. And I dunno what you call it, but it felt nice. It felt good. And I thought you felt it too...'

He shrugged and let his arms fall back against his trousers with a slap.

'I guess I was wrong.'

He turned and left the house. The screen door thwacked back into place behind him.

Regan made it as far as the car. He opened the door and was about to get in when he heard the sounds of her walking towards him. He smiled to himself then wiped it off his face before turning to face her.

She stopped a yard away from him, the red dust of the yard coating her feet and the hem of her dress.

'You're welcome to come again Regan.' She paused. 'I've enjoyed your visits too. You're right with some of what you say. I am starved for company, and Lucinda's stories are nowhere as interesting as yours I'm afraid.'

She smiled nervously and Regan smiled back, placing his hands on the top sill of the car door, leaning in closer.

She continued. 'You just have to realise I am married to Connor. You need to respect that. He is my husband, Regan. My husband'

'But he's not Lucinda's father...'

Rose shook her head, as if trying to shake away the tears that were forming behind her eyes.

'That was a mistake. And you were no more ready to be a dad than I was to be a mum. But I had no choice'

'You never gave me the choice. You took the decision away from me'

'Oh for chrissake Regan, what are you saying? That you were ready to settle down? Get married? Support a family? Was that before off after you knocked off the head of the statue of your patron saint and got expelled from school?'

Regan shrugged.

'C'mon' she continued, 'if I had given you the choice you would have run a mile, just like you did anyway.'

She placed her hands over her face then pushed them back through her hair. When she spoke again it was softly.

'Connor was there for me Regan. He's been a good dad to Lucinda, been a good husband'

'Is it enough?' Regan asked simply.

Rose took a moment before replying.

'Yes. It is. For now it is. And I wish he didn't have to go to Vietnam, but that wasn't his choice, just the luck of the draw'

Regan lightened, his face opening into a familiar smirk.

'Well actually...'

'No Regan that's enough. You're welcome here but only on the basis that you don't run Connor down. He's my husband, *your brother*. If you can't respect that don't come here again. Is that clear?'

Regan looked back at her with wild eyes and pursed lips but said nothing.

'I asked you, is that clear?'

'Yeah ok' he nodded.

She leaned in and gave him a hug. With the car door between them it was a clumsy act, but Regan could feel himself stiffen with her touch. He rested his head into her neck, breathing in her scent. Turning his head slightly his lips touched the soft skin at the nape of her neck.

After a moment she pulled away and he could feel moisture on his shoulder and it took a moment for him to realise it was her tears.

Then she was gone, striding back to the house. He watched her all the way but she didn't look back once.

It was a full minute after she disappeared inside that Regan turned and sat in his car. Another passed before he fired the ignition and drove slowly away down the drive.

Nineteen

'I'll give you just two pieces of advice'

The Military Policeman standing guard at the gates of the base smiled.

'One. Use a condom. Two. Hold onto your wallet'

He was a stocky American with an oversized jaw. He spoke with such a drawl it took Connor a moment to decipher what he had said.

'So tell me. Where you going, *digger*?' he asked.

Connor reached into the pocket of white shirt, which along with a pair of fawn trousers made up his army issue casuals. He hadn't seen them since they were presented to him back in Saigon but they had miraculously turned up, hanging in the locker beside his bed in the barracks, clean and pressed.

'Someplace called Tom's. China Beach' Connor replied, reading the letters scrawled on a scrap of paper.

He had remained in bed that day long after the other men had left in pursuit of beer and women. They ragged him for not accompanying them, bashing him with pillows and fists. But he held firm, staying alone in his narrow bed in the deserted barracks until well after midday, relishing the softness of the bed with its starched white cotton sheets. Even once he woke he stayed in bed, staring at the roof of the barracks, a room that reminded him of the dormitories of his school days. He savoured the sound of

near silence that filled the empty building in the early afternoon, a silence only interrupted by the occasional sound of a C130 thundering overhead, causing the fibrolite walls of the barracks to shudder.

The MP whistled and summonsed a rickshaw out of nowhere. He leaned in to talk to the driver in what seemed like a mixture of Vietnamese and English before turning back to Connor.

'He'll take you. Just don't give him any more than a dollar, these guys will try in on if they know you're new' he said, then added with his best Aussie accent 'Have fun, *mate*.'

The streets of Da Nang were crowded dirty and chaotic. But after three month months in the jungle Connor was thrilled to be back in civilisation.

The narrow streets teemed with life. Open drains filled with pungent grey water ran down their sides, criss-crossed with makeshift bridges that linked shops and houses to the roadway. Any available space between them was filled with merchants displaying their wares on rickety wooden trolleys with tiny steel wheels, or simply spread out on the ground on sheets or grass-mats. There was an array of brightly coloured fruits and vegetables. Bottles and tubes of toiletries and cleaning products. Clothes neatly piled up on cartons to ensure each variety could be seen. Cigarettes and bottles of all shapes and sizes refilled with local spirits. A man in a grubby white coat displayed dried medicines and mysterious brown bottles and vials.

Everywhere there were people. On bikes, rickshaws and on foot. Selling, buying or browsing. Making hast or standing idly on street corners, smoking cigarettes. Chickens

darted on nimble feet to avoid being trampled in the throng, pecking at the dusty ground when they could.

They turned into a lane crowded with street cafes where locals sat at bamboo chairs and tables eating noodles from steaming bowls, alongside soldiers feasting on hamburgers and hotdogs. Vendors offering street food, cooked dumplings and fish in woks filled with oil over smouldering coals. One man frying vegetables and noodles flicked his wok up over the flames and for an instant the oil flashed alight so close to where Connor passed on the rickshaw that he could feel its warmth on his cheek.

The rickshaw driver swerved around a cow that was grazing through a pile of rubbish, then pushed harder on the pedals and soon they left the bustle of the town behind and sped along a stretch of road through the countryside. A man on a bicycle passed them carrying a goat with its rear legs straddling the top tube of the bike's frame and its front legs over the handlebars. The goat pointed its nose into the headwind like a figurehead on an old sailing vessel.

Sections of the road were lined with ramshackle housing. Some were rough brick shelters with corrugated iron roofs, but most were made from mud-brick, bamboo, thatched palm and banana leaves, just the same as the rural villages.

Faces peered out at him from huts lining the roadside. At one stage kids in dirty school uniforms ran alongside shouting for money. 'One American Dollar' they screamed, their hands outstretched. He looked down at their dirty faces, their hopeful, gap-toothed smiles. One small girl managed to catch up and grabbed hold of Connor's shirt sleeve, tugging at it to gain his attention. Connor grasped the hand and pushed it

away, his clean hand feeling the grittiness of the girl's skin for a moment before she fell away behind the rickshaw. Her grubby hand print remained on his white shirt. Connor brushed at it but only made it fade slightly.

Ten minutes later he began to smell salt air. He could hear the faint crash of waves over the constant squeak and graunch of the rickshaw's gears. The driver strained to mount a rise up to a paved road that ran along a strip of white sand. Connor guessed it was China Beach.

There were groups of GI's sitting or walking on the sand, whilst others could be seen surfing Malibus on the small swell that rolled in from left to right. A few hundred metres further the driver slowed to a halt alongside a cluster of concrete block buildings that had been constructed on the dunes.

He could hear the sound of Buddy Holly singing.

'Tom' the driver said and pointed down an alleyway.

He thrust out the one dollar that the MP told him it would cost. The rickshaw driver was catching his breath but summonsed enough energy to look down with scorn at it. Before he could complain Connor dropped the banknote on the ground and walked down the entranceway towards Buddy Holly.

He glanced over his shoulder to see the rickshaw driver scramble in the sand, trying to grab his money before the wind took it away.

By sunset the party at Tom's was raging. Along with the men from Connor's unit was a collection of soldiers from the US and Canada, and a group of Kiwis that, in the spirit of trans-Tasman rivalry were attempting to assert their supremacy through a series of drinking races.

The mood was rowdy and boisterous, and as dusk set in more partygoers wandered in off the beach, many wearing only board-shorts. Tom, the Vietnamese owner and sole barman worked the room, encouraging the soldiers.

'Drink more beer' he yelled. 'Take a girl'. The tiny man was lifted up by one soldier and handed from shoulder to shoulder around the room as he giggled and begged to be put down.

Connor was drunk within half an hour of arriving. The men from his unit ribbed him for arriving late, forcing him to skull three beers straight off to catch up, as they sung with artistic license 'Wake up Sleepy Jean' tonelessly.

Scattered through the bar were a number of local girls. To Connor they looked identical. Tiny things that barely came up to his shoulder. Dressed in low-cut frocks made from shiny fabrics their faces were plastered with glossy red lipstick and splashes of gaudy eye-shadow.

During the early stages of the evening he ignored them each time they had silently appeared at his side, their long nails scratching at his elbow to gain attention. As the night wore on they became more impatient as it became apparent that the Aussies and Kiwis, who made up most of the bar's patrons, were more interested in drinking than doing anything more physical.

At one stage Tim Vaughn became irritated with a somewhat buck-teethed girl.

'I wouldn't fuck that if she was paying' he proclaimed loudly and pushed her away.

She tottered for a moment on her oversized heels then fell backwards onto the bar's concrete floor. The other girls quickly rushed to her aid, looking scornfully eyes at the Aussie soldiers, who remained largely indifferent to her plight.

Connor remained staring at her as she made it back to her feet. She met his gaze and pouted at him with a frown, blaming him with her eyes. He turned away self-consciously then looked back to find she was still staring at him but her hurt frown was gone. In its place was a smile of mock shyness, her head tilted forward to look up at him through long mascaraed eyelashes. Connor blushed and shot her back a weak grin.

However subtle the smile was, it was enough to be noticed.

'For fucks sake Connor,' Vaughn slurred, grabbing him roughly by the shoulder and leaning in so that specks of spittle flew into his face. 'You don't have to flirt with them mate. They're fucking whores.'

Connor didn't reply, but turned his back on the buck-teethed girl and re-joined the group.

It was midnight.

A handful of Americans sat at the bar with a girl sitting giggling on each knee. The remaining New Zealanders joined the Aussies and were arguing over which was the

better game, rugby or Aussie Rules. Things became heated when a particularly loud mouthed Kiwi got up into the face of Vaughn who was a Victorian and Aussie Rules die-hard.

'You're game's nothing more than a lolly scramble' the Kiwi laughed, 'and when they try to tackle, if you can call it that, they're actually trying to pull down each other's shorts. Must be a bunch of poofs I reckon...'

He didn't get to finish. Vaughn swung a hook that dropped the Kiwi digger back onto his rear end.

His compatriots looked reluctant to fight at this late stage of the evening, but after a moment's hesitation seemed to realise that national pride was on the line. They stepped in to back up their mate.

The brawl was a half-hearted affair. The few girls cuddling with soldiers ran away screaming. A couple of punches were thrown but then it was more just push and shove. By the time the Americans intervened, accompanied by Tom who ran out from behind the bar wielding a broom to separate the men and protect his bar, the fight fizzled out.

'Time to go now. Time to go' shouted Tom 'MP come soon'

The soldiers, seemingly all friends again, started to drift out of the bar towards a line of rickshaws on the roadside sitting patiently to ferry them back to the base.

Connor got halfway down the lane that ran through the warren of lean-tos built between the beach and the roadway when he decided he needed to urinate. He cut

down a side alley and followed it, finding himself atop a sandy depression that once would have been a small basin in the middle of the dunes, but was now a rubbish dump, and if the smell was anything to go by a toilet.

Connor undid his fly and began to relieve himself. Away from the booming stereo and drunken conversations at Tom's the evening was quiet. A cool breeze brushed in his face. Connor felt exceptionally drunk. The thought seemed to unbalance him and he tottered forward on the balls of his feet. He needed to take a step to steady himself, spraying urine on his shoes and trousers in the process.

He managed to finish without further incident. He pulled up his zip and turned to make his way to the rickshaws. However from this direction he could see there was a number of dark alleyways disappearing into the cluster of huts. He stood swaying and tried to swallow the taste of alcohol rising ominously from his stomach. There were at least four possible options, and Connor was in no condition to work out which one he should take.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. A figure had appeared at the end of one passage. Or had maybe been there all along. The tiny physique could only belong to a local. Two eyes glowed in the moonlight.

'What path do I take to get back?'

The figure stepped out of the shadows. It took Connor a moment to recognise the buck-teethed girl from the bar that Vaughn pushed over.

'Hi,' he said, flapping his hand in something passing for a wave, 'can you show me the way back'.

The girl walked to him and with a demure smile held out her hand to him. Connor accepted it and as their hands met she introduced herself.

'My name Lulu' she smiled.

In response Connor nodded to show he had understood, but the niceties were not over it seemed.

'Your name is?' she asked.

'Connor' he said. The R came out sounding more like a W so he repeated himself.

'OK Connor,' she said, 'you come with me OK Connor?'

She led him down one of the pathways in the middle of the mass of huts. Connor noticed that some of the path was a sand base, whilst other sections climbed onto bamboo platforms, to cross uneven ground. In the middle of one of these boardwalk sections Lulu stopped and turned to face him.

'You want to see where Lulu live?'

She continued to hold his hand, but moved her other hand to the front of his trousers and began to massage his penis through the fabric.

The rubbing wasn't particularly sensual; her hand motion was too rapid. More like brushing out a stain than something to excite him. Connor however did not stop her.

'Come, you come' she said and backed slowly to the open door of a single room hut built on poles and connected to the main walkway with a narrow bamboo bridge. Inside it was pitch black apart from a sliver of moonlight splicing through the doorway. Lulu disappeared into the darkness.

Without her holding him he felt unsteady on his feet, and was about to turn and step back out onto the walkway when the flame of a match illuminated the hut.

Lulu crouched over a low shelf containing personal items. Makeup, underwear, and a single candle which she lit with the match. Connor noticed her hair was incredibly long. As she crouched it spilled all the way to the floor, cloaking her almost entirely, leaving only her stiletto heels poking out from underneath.

She stood and stepped to him, driving her petite body against his. He could feel her small breasts pressing against his ribcage, her pubic bone pushing hard on his thigh. Reaching both hands around the back of his head she pulled her lips up to his and began kissing him. Her surprisingly long tongue darted into his mouth, probing inside. She began moving herself up and down his thigh and he could feel the heat coming from her. At the same time she thrust her hand back down to his trousers and resumed her insistent rubbing.

The effort of kissing was making Connor feel unsteady and he prized his face away. Undeterred, Lulu took it as a signal to focus her efforts elsewhere and she dropped quickly to a crouch and began to unfasten his belt.

Connor closed his eyes and abruptly his thoughts went to Sydney, the night he and Regan went out drinking and ended up at a strip club. That night he had been as drunk as he was now, yet despite his brother's urging to join him upstairs he had refused.

Lulu managed to remove his belt and was fumbling with the button at the top of his pants.

In Sydney he had only been able to think of his wife and daughter. *What was different now?* Rose and Lucinda and the little cottage in Broken River that they had made their home seemed so far away.

His thoughts turned to the week on the beach at Yamba. They had made love every day in afternoon whilst Lucinda slept, the small tent hidden behind the dunes coming alive with the sounds of their passion. How good it had felt to rekindle the love they had felt for each other as teenagers, to enjoy the simple pleasures of exploring each other's bodies in an unhurried and gentle way.

The touch of Lulu's lips on his penis brought Connor back to the present, and he reacted instantly and instinctively, pushing her away. Once again her heels proved her undoing. She was unable to keep her footing and tumbled back onto a straw mattress.

Connor pulled up his trousers and fastened the button before turning to go, not pausing to do up his belt or close his fly. He had taken one step when Lulu, quickly back on her feet, grabbed him roughly by the arm, her long nails digging into his skin.

'Hey you no go treat Lulu like that' she screeched at him.

Connor gave no response and kept moving towards the door. With one hand she hit him in the middle of his back with a tiny fist.

'You still gotta pay. Give Lulu five dollars'.

Something inside Connor snapped, and he swung around and with the back of his hand and slapped her across the face. The blow was not hard, but it lifted her off her feet and sent her small frame flying onto the floor.

She lay motionless in heap.

Connor turned and walked unsteadily from the hut.

Twenty

As he headed up the now familiar curves and climbs of the Pacific Highway, Regan felt a rising sense of anticipation.

He brought with him not one, but two bottles of French champagne.

His plan was to tell Rose they were a gift from Frank Sheldon, given to him in appreciation of a job well done.

The truth was that he'd shelled out a small fortune on the champagne at a poncy wine shop in Double Bay. But Regan felt strongly he needed a watertight back-story. To turn up with grog would surely raise suspicions as to his motives. But she would not question such a gift, especially after all he had told her of Sheldon's means and style. And being champagne it would surely be hard for her to refuse a glass, or hopefully three or four.

Regan was certain she would be impressed. He had already rehearsed in his mind what he would say. 'Frank means well when he lavishes this kind of stuff on you, but truth be told I'm more of a beer and whiskey man. It's supposed to be nice wine, pretty expensive I think.' And then the clincher, 'I didn't really have anyone else to share it with but you Rose'

He had considered bringing up either chocolates or flowers, either of which would have been a cheaper exercise. But he couldn't make the same explanation fit. Even champagne was a little poofy for one bloke to give to another. Besides, he smiled to

himself, chocolates or flowers weren't alcoholic, and Regan reckoned that a little intoxication might be just what was needed to move things on from that one clumsy hug.

Today, like on his second trip, he asked William James if he could meet him with the bag of cash earlier in the day. Regan wanted to make it through to Broken River by dinner time, but of course James knew nothing of this.

The wily accountant had coolly agreed. However when they had met in the car-park of Sheldon Investments a little after nine, he kept a grip of the handle of the sports bag as he handed it over, using it to pull Regan in close. James' already thin eyes narrowed as he studied Regan's face looking for something lost amongst the troughs and valleys of his nose, cheeks and chin. Then he returned to centre, looking deeply into Regan's eyes as if he had now decided to study the inside of his head using his eye sockets as peepholes.

'Now I've been asking myself why this man in front of me is keen to get away so early in the day,' he said quietly in his typical monotone. 'And I'm telling myself that the desire to reach the bright lights and pretty girls of the Gold Coast before closing time have nothing to do with this request.'

James paused and gave a sharp tug on the bag, pulling Regan closer.

'Especially given Mister Sheldon's *strict and explicit instructions* to settle in to a nice quiet motel with only the television for company.'

Regan felt himself flush.

'I... um... I don't like driving in the dark' he stammered 'Yeah, that's it. Night-time driving – I don't like it.'

William James stood motionless, probing Regan with his pinhole eyes. His relentless glare caused more words to fall out.

'Plus it's a long drive and I like to take a few stops along the way.'

James released his grip on the bag, sending Regan back onto his heels. He was about to retreat to his car when James pointed his index finger at him.

'There's a lot of money in that bag and there is a lot riding on this deal' he said, thrusting his finger to punctuate his words. 'Don't. Fuck. It. Up'

Regan supposed he could have told him he was staying over with family in Broken River, but why take the risk of being told this was unacceptable. Besides, it makes no difference. He would stay the night with Rose, hopefully in her bed, and deliver Murdoch his money in the morning. No problem, no harm done.

He cleared the outskirts of Broken River and accelerated back to sixty-five. The sun had begun to set behind the mountains to the west. Even though Regan hated Broken River he had to admit that it was a beautiful evening, the area's rolling pasture and fields of sugarcane bathed in golden light. The days were getting longer, it was the first time he had travelled along this length of road in daylight. Before he knew it summer would be upon them and he'd be able to make the entire trip before sunset. He frowned. Surely his trips north for Sheldon Investments could not continue indefinitely. Soon the necessary permits would be granted.

One of Frank Sheldon's mantras was 'Life is a game of chess. It's not about knowing your next move, but the one after that and the one after that.'

Most of the time Regan didn't know what his next move was, let alone beyond it. He thought back to his last day at school. He hadn't contemplated the significance of knocking the head off the statue. He hadn't planned it, not even thought about why he was doing it, much less the consequences.

That Sunday morning he hid in the toilets in their dormitory, sitting on the toilet with his feet off the floor. He remained there for ten minutes after the bell for church. He hadn't intended to skip mass but Regan was wild with anger. He had met with Rose the previous night. She told him she was pregnant. She adamant the child was Connor's. He knew it was a lie.

He began rummaging through the lockers of the senior boarders, searching for contraband. The results were disappointing, and he gave up after ten minutes of sifting through soiled underwear and rotting food yielded only a couple of chocolate bars and one Playboy magazine.

He headed for the staff room.

He felt apprehensive as the door creaked in on its hinges, even though he knew the room would be empty. He felt excitement too. A voyeur's thrill. The room smelt of stale tobacco, coffee and the musty old couches. Beams of sunlight streamed through the tall windows that ran the length of the room creating walls of dust suspended like plankton. Coming out of the gloom of the corridor it took a moment for his eyes to

adjust but then he was quickly into his work, searching through cupboards and in the pockets of overcoats hanging on hooks by the door.

After helping himself to wine biscuits found in the cupboard, Regan sat back in one of the sagging armchairs and smoked a cigarette butt he picked out of the overflowing ashtray on the table. It was then that he saw the axe, wedged in a large round of timber that sat in the wood pile by the fireplace. Its metal glinted in the sunlight.

Regan walked through the school swinging the axe at nothing in particular, enjoying its weight, feel and menacing promise. With the exception of a lizard that he cut neatly in half, he resisted the temptation to use it. Whilst there was plenty of scope to chop up desks, walls and blackboards, it seemed to Regan a waste of the axe's true destructive potential. It seemed destined for greater things.

It was only as he walked outside into the asphalt assembly area at the front of the school that inspiration struck. He had always disliked the statue of Marcellin Champagnat that stood leering over the boys at assembly time. A popular game to play at morning interval and lunchtime involved a soccer ball and the statue. They pretended the school's patron saint was a striker ready to head the ball into an imaginary goal. They would yell 'Centre, Centre!' and spike the ball into the statue, aiming to get it bouncing off Champagnat's head. Regan and some of his cronies grew bored with trying to gracefully loop the ball in and began to kick it with some gusto, relishing the shots that hit, making Champagnat quake on his concrete foundation. Ball games on the asphalt were banned shortly after.

Regan stood staring at the statue, taking in the oversized rosary beads. Hands clasped humbly together. Champagnat's smug smile reminded Regan of his father. The thin grin of a weak man. He stepped up onto the concrete plinth.

From that point invisible strings controlled his actions. He may have started down the path of destruction, but now the momentum was such he couldn't stop if he wanted to.

It was the same now with Rose. There was something about her. She looked nice, of course, that was the minimum requirement. But it was more than that. She was smart and capable. She didn't seem to crave attention or compliments like the girls he knew in Sydney. She was who she was and didn't care if what you thought.

Whatever it was, Regan knew that he had to have her, that he wouldn't stop pursuing her until she was his. But then what? Connor was only away in Vietnam for a couple of years, maybe less if the war ended sooner, and would surely return wanting his wife back. Regan hadn't contemplated a situation where Connor would become aware of his contact with Rose. That would be unfortunate.

Besides, he had no real idea of what his intentions with Rose were. He had no plan beyond sleeping with her, apart from possibly sleeping with her again. He was a young man, and had always been scornful of Connor's decision to settle down with one girl at such a young age, let alone get married and raise a child. It was nothing he wanted for himself. Yes, it was entirely possible that once the requirement to make deliveries up north ceased so too would his visits to Rose. The thrill of the chase by then would be over, and with it any further need to call on her.

Yes, Regan thought, he was certainly different to Frank Sheldon. Sheldon was a hawk. Regan, a magpie chasing shiny things. And maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. Perhaps fortune rode on his shoulders. Cream always rose to the top, they said. The act of vandalism at school that had led to his expulsion had turned out for the best. This latest escapade surely would as well.

He was dragged from his thoughts with the realisation that he had reached his destination. He braked and turned into the long gravel drive that led to the cottage where Rose was waiting. The car juddered across a cattle stop then he changed into second and accelerated up the drive, winding his window up to keep out the dust cloud that was billowing from under the Holden's tyres.

After pulling to a stop at the front of the house, he twisted the rear-view mirror down to give his appearance a once over. From the pocket of his jacket, draped over the headrest of the passenger seat, he pulled a comb and tidied his hair with long strokes from his forehead through to the top of his neck, where his hair became a mop of curls that sat atop his collar. Simultaneously licking the tips of his thumb and small finger, he made a v with his hand and smoothed his eyebrows down in one clean motion. Before returning the mirror to its original position he blew himself a kiss, smiling at his foolery, before stepping from the car.

He opened the rear and reached in to take out his overnight bag. He no longer felt presumptuous about bringing it inside as soon as he arrived. Underneath it sat a bottle of champagne. He reached for the yellow sports bag. Normally he kept this locked

securely in the boot, but had moved it to the back seat to stop the bottles rolling around and clinking together.

Regan was halfway to the back door, his overnight bag over his shoulder and a bottle in each hand, when he paused. He wondered making an entrance with not one but two bottles of wine may make Rose a little skittish. He dropped his duffle bag onto the ground and slid one of the bottles inside, pulling a jersey over the top of it to keep it out of view. Satisfied with his judgement he slung the bag over his shoulder and made his way to the house.

Rose had dressed simply, in blue jeans and a white t-shirt, and was preparing baked sausages, mashed potatoes and peas. She heard the low roar of the car and the slam of its door. A moment later the fly screen squeaked and she turned to the door.

In Regan's hand was a bottle of fancy looking wine. He smiled and held it out to her.

'What's that in aid of?' she asked in an even tone.

'Oh, not sure if it's any good, just a bottle of plonk Frank gave me to celebrate a job well done' he replied.

Rose eyed the bottle cautiously. 'What was the job then?'

'Sorry?' he said looking a little lost.

'What were you celebrating?' Rose asked.

Regan looked blankly back at her she pointed to the bottle as if it held the answer that was evading him.

'Oh, we just, um, finalised a deal on piece on land that we want to develop' he said.

'Oh, congratulations then' she smiled thinly. 'What are you going to do with it?'

'Well I brought it here because I thought you might want to share it, celebrate with me?' Regan held the bottle out to her again.

'Oh no, not for me,' she shook her head. 'I don't really drink. Anymore'

Regan looked a little agitated, and for a moment Rose felt as if he might push the issue but then he relented, lowering the bottle briefly before raising it again.

'At least pop it in the fridge. In case you change your mind. Or I might have to drink the whole thing on my own' he chuckled.

Rose frowned but took the bottle and put it in the fridge.

'So what have you been doing' she asked, wanting to change the subject.

It didn't take long for Regan to wind into a long account of his various activities in Sydney. Rose found herself drifting away from his monologue and thinking back to the last night she had allowed herself to get drunk. In the two years since the night of the beach party her thoughts had returned there often and even more frequently since Regan had strutted back into her life. However as time went on she found her perspective changed.

Until lately she had firmly cast Regan as the villain. In his absence from her life this had been easy. But over the last two months as they had spent time together her opinion of him softened somewhat, notwithstanding their set-to of last time. But even then Regan had moved quickly to apologise and explain himself, and she had found herself liking him all the more because of it. It was just like in *Pride and Prejudice*, she thought, as Elizabeth's opinion of Darcy changes as he gradually reveals himself to her.

It had been simple for her to lay the blame solely at Regan's feet for what had happened in the sand dunes that night. The reality was different and Rose admitted that to herself now. She got drunk all on her own, or at least with the help of her girlfriends. No one poured booze down her throat or spiked her drink. And as she got more and more drunk she had become annoyed at Connor for his non arrival at the party, ostensibly held in honour of him and his victorious team mates. The constant questions that were asked of her as to where Connor was played on her own insecurities.

Then Regan showed up, a can of beer in each hand and a cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth. He seemed happy to flirt with her as she was with him. She cringed at the thought of how ridiculous she must have looked. All tarted up in a dress of her mother's, wearing too much makeup, laughing loudly at Regan's jokes and draping her hands on his arms and chest as she flicked her hair and pouted. At one stage she solicited one of his cigarettes and tried to smoke it but all that resulted was a coughing fit.

And as the booze started to catch up with her, the smile faded from her face to be replaced with a blank stare as she pushed her way unsteadily through the crowd looking for Connor. She tried to focus, but the faces formed a kaleidoscope she struggled to unscramble. And all she wanted was Connor to come to her rescue, to take her home to bed so she could sleep it off.

Then to her relief she saw Connor and she smiled and tried to tell him how happy she was to see him but it came out slurred and nonsensical. But he seemed to understand and took her by the hand and led her away from the crowd of the party, the mad noise of shouting and laughter. And she was happy to be led up away from the car park and into the dunes where it was quiet. The cool breeze coming in off the sea calmed her down. But the sand was hard to walk in and she lost one of her shoes and it was only when Connor wouldn't stop for her to pick it up that she realised the man that was leading her away was not Connor at all.

She was brought back to the present when Regan asked her a question.

'I was just wondering what we're having for dinner?' Regan asked. 'I think it's burning.'

Regan opened the wine while Rose was mashing potatoes at the stove. At the sound of the cork popping cork she looked over her shoulder and briefly met his gaze, his expression that of a cheeky little boy caught in the midst doing something naughty. She finished the dinner preparations in silence as Regan ferretted around in the cupboards for glasses. *Well if its champagne flutes you're after you're out of luck*, she thought.

She served the meal out onto two plates. The sausages were burnt. As she was bringing them to the table she saw that Regan had laid out two of her oldest tea cups, hand-me-downs with ghastly floral designs, the champagne bottle sitting regally between them.

'Ah, bangers and mash – my favourite' said Regan enthusiastically.

Rose frowned as she placed the meals on the table. Regan noticed and correctly interpreted the reason.

'Connor's favourite too, isn't it' he said.

Rose nodded, trying to smile.

As she sat Regan reached across the table and took her hand.

'He'll be back before you know it ok?' he said, staring earnestly into her eyes and nodding with an encouraging smile.

'I know' she nodded and smiled then removed her hand from his grasp.

'On that note,' Regan said, reaching for the champagne bottle and filling both cups to the brim, 'let's drink a toast to Connor – a real Aussie hero, doing his duty for Queen and country.' He raised his cup and looked enquiringly at Rose.

Connor. Somewhere in Vietnam. Hopefully alive and in one piece. She found it difficult to connect with him, not knowing where he was or what he was doing. His letters were sporadic and said little. What the censor left was an account of the mundane aspects of his life there. It was hot. Damp. The food was bad. Writing was never Connor's

strong point. But despite this disconnect, sitting here with Regan, drinking champagne and eating his favourite meal seemed incredibly disloyal and Rose felt a flash of guilt.

'I told you Regan – I don't drink' she said, her arms held tight to her sides, hands resting over her knife and fork.

Regan dipped his head and looked up at her through raised eyebrows.

'C'mon - just one little glass. Not only must you help me celebrate, but I've just made a toast to your husband.' He cast a look at the teacup with its purple roses, wine fizzing at the brim. 'C'mon' he repeated, 'just a sip'.

Finally Rose broke the stalemate and reached for her cup. As she was lifting it to her mouth Regan shot a hand out.

'Wait!' he said. Rose brought the cup to a stop an inch away from her lips, her eyebrows creasing into a frown.

Regan smiled 'It's not a proper toast until we clink our glasses together' he said, pushing his lavender decorated cup out into space in front of her.

Rose sighed and shook her head but brought her cup out to meet his.

'To us Rose,' Regan said. 'To friendships that grow out of rocky starts.'

'I thought we were toasting Connor?' Rose shot back.

'Yeah, that too' he said and clinked his cup roughly against hers, causing some of his wine to slop up and over the edge of his glass. It dripped down onto his plate where it

pooled up against one of his sausages. He guzzled greedily from his cup, emptying it in three consecutive gulps.

'Now I'm no connoisseur, but I'd say that's a pretty bloody good bottle of plonk'

Rose took a sip and started her meal.

Regan refilled his cup and immediately knocked down half of it, then started where he had left off, telling her about some developers plans for a huge water park on the Gold Coast.

'He'll have dolphins jumping through hoops, and water slides and a heap of other rides, and there's some talk he'll even get some orca whales in there' he gushed with enthusiasm in between filling his mouth with large forkfuls of sausage, mash and peas, all the time washed down with more champagne.

Each time he emptied his cup and filled it he would top up Rose's, ignoring her protestations and not seeming to notice the level in her cup had barely dropped. Despite this Rose was feeling a little light-headed by the end of the meal, while Regan who was on at least his fourth cup had a definitive glow about him. His volume increased as the level of wine in the bottle fell.

'I'm thinking that the smart thing might be for me to move up there, get amongst things' he said. 'Maybe I'll take you up there with me...'

Rose let her knife drop. It clanked noisily on her plate. 'Excuse me?' she demanded.

'Calm down, I just meant for the day, come up when I'm doing my business with the council up there,' he smiled. 'That's all I meant.'

Rose let the subject drop, but she could feel her anxiety rising. Not only was Regan drunk, but with it he was becoming increasingly familiar with her. And the old smirk had returned.

She cleared the table and began to wash the dishes and pans, ignoring Regan's demands to leave them and join her back at the table. She was happy to have some distance between them, even though there remained the uncomfortable knowledge that the now silent Regan was following her with his eyes as she worked. She resolved that once she had finished her chores she would tell him she had a headache and wanted an early night. She thought back to the first night he stayed when she had had barricaded her bedroom door with a chair and wondered that tonight it might be wise for her to do the same.

She was placing the last of the cutlery in the draining tray when she heard Lucinda grizzling from the next room. Drying her hands as she went to check on the child she glanced across at Regan whose earlier exuberance had seemingly disappeared with the last of the wine. He stared at her with a downcast mouth and morose eyes, saying nothing as she passed by.

Rose left the bedroom light off and checked on Lucinda using only the light from the hallway. As Rose was inspecting Lucinda's nappy she heard the pop of a cork.

Another bottle. The bugger has a second bottle.

She hurriedly cleaned Lucinda's bottom and begun changing her nappy.

A figure appeared in the doorway.

It blocked out the light.

Rose felt her heartbeat quicken.

'I'll be right out' she said.

Her voice was loud, trying to conceal her growing panic.

The shadow didn't move. He did not reply. The only sound she could hear was his breathing.

Rose finished changing Lucinda but she still needed to feed her, to expose her breast.

She moved to close the door and turn on the light.

Regan took a step towards her. He was now inside the room. Between her and the door. Between her and the light switch.

'C'mon lets have another glass of wine' she said cheerfully and took a tentative step towards the doorway.

Regan didn't move.

She stopped a metre from him.

'C'mon, how about another glass of wine?' Rose said again, unable to hide the tremor in her voice.

'How about a kiss?' he slurred back.

He took an unsteady step towards her.

She tried to step around him and make her escape to the kitchen, but despite his intoxication he was still quick enough to catch her. He wrapped one arm around her waist and picked her up, taking two steps before dumping her roughly on the bed. She tried to roll off to the side, but he was quickly on top of her.

'I said, how about a kiss?' he said, and she could smell the sour tang of wine on his breath, his mouth hovering just above hers. She struggled from underneath him and almost wriggled free but he quickly rearranged himself, pinning her legs down with his weight. His hands clamped onto her arms just below her shoulders. He pushed her down, hard, into the mattress. She tried to thrust her legs up in the hope of ramming her knee into his groin, but Regan felt the movement and guessed her intent, pushing down harder, hurting her.

'You're a feisty one you are Rose, always have been' he said. Small globules of his spittle landed on her face. 'I like that in a girl'.

He lowered himself down to kiss her and she could feel the hardness in his trousers pushing into her. With it came a wave of fear that swept over her. In the half light of the room she could see his face, his expression crazed with desire, his lips coming down to meet hers. She twisted her head away, craning her neck to get her face as far away from him as she could. Undeterred he began to kiss her neck, his tongue snaking into her ear. She cried out in disgust and he stopped, but only to breathe directly into the same ear he had just licked.

'What's the matter Rose? Why you playing hard to get? You know you want it, I mean, how long has it been? You must be choking for it, I bet you're wet as fuck down there

aren't you?' Regan removed one hand from where it was pinning her arm and thrust it roughly down the front of her jeans. In spite of her revulsion she seized the opportunity to make use of her free hand and flailed out towards the chair by her bedside, trying to grab hold of something. But the chair was out of her reach. She felt Regan's hand pushing down into her underwear, his fingers tearing at her pubic hair.

Then, everything slowed down.

The sounds of the room came to her separately.

The rustle of the clothes and limbs twisting against each another as they grappled.

Regan's heavy, rushed breathing.

Rose's feeble resistance.

Her voice. Begging him to stop.

The same sounds.

Seventeen years old again.

Silly, immature, drunk.

It was only two years ago but to Rose it could be a lifetime.

She is a woman now.

A wife and a mother.

She cares for her child and runs the household on her own.

She is not the same person that allowed Regan to lead her by the hand into the sand dunes.

That night she told him she was scared but all he did was laugh.

Over the roar of the waves no one could hear her crying.

Tonight there was no one to help her either.

But she wasn't that same person.

This wasn't happening again.

The calmness allowed Rose to compose herself. She looked up at Regan's face, features etched in concentration, his tongue wedged out the corner of his mouth like a dog. She looked into his black eyes and realised he was looking straight at her but was not seeing her, his pupils glazed and unfocused.

It mattered not. She had found her target. But she knew she would only get one shot.

With careful aim and with all her strength she jabbed her thumb deep into his eye. She could feel the eyeball compress momentarily before her thumb slipped past it into the back of the eye socket. She was struck by how similar it felt to shucking the cockles she collected from the estuary.

She closed her eyes and waited until she heard the roar of pain.

It began low, starting in his mouth then moving down into his belly, growing in size and strength as it went, drowning out Lucinda's cries.

He began grasping around, ripping away the hand that had been probing deep into her underwear and flailing around as if he thought there was something still embedded in his eye. She shoved him hard in the chest and finding him slightly off balance pushed him again, bringing one side of her body up and twisting around use as much leverage as she could muster.

With a third shove she managed to push him off the bed.

She moved quickly, spurred on by the fear of an imminent retaliation, and sprung up off the bed.

In one neat scoop she lifted the still wailing Lucinda from her cot and ran barefoot from the house.

Her first thought was to run and hide. But where?

The barn?

Behind the eucalyptus trees?

Down in the old Morton Bay Fig on the shore of the estuary?

But she realised that Lucinda's cries would give their location away in the minute or two it would take to quieten the child down.

Unable to decide what to do she began to run blindly away from the house, to at least get clear of the light that shone out the cottage's windows, punctuating the darkness. Regan's car came into view. Rose ran to it. She looked inside and spied the keys in the

ignition. She opened the driver's door and got in, Lucinda on her lap. The driver's window was half way down so she wound it up to closed and made sure the doors were locked. It had been a while since she had driven. She checked the keys, turning the ignition so the dashboard lit up, before switching it off again. Then she moved the gearstick into first, second, third, then back to first, pressed down on the clutch, the brake, the accelerator. She checked the handbrake was off, all the time keeping her eyes glued to the house.

As she lifted the front of her t-shirt to feed Lucinda she saw that it was ripped near the neck. Suddenly the realisation of the night's events hits her, sending a shiver through her. She began to feed Lucinda, the child quietening upon the first touch of her tiny lips to Rose's nipple.

The shivering continued and Rose didn't know if it was from the cold, the onset of shock, or a combination of both. She craned to reach around on the backseat of the car for a jersey, blanket or anything warm that might stop her shivering.

Her hands fell onto a sports bag.

It was not so heavy and with one hand she was able to lift it and swing it onto the front seat, keeping her eyes glued on the house the whole time.

She unzipped the bag and reached inside.

Her eyes fell away from the house, and she looked down into the bag.

Her mouth dropped open in surprise.

She stopped shivering.

Twenty-One

They were taken deep into the bush in the back of an Iroquois. The other men took positions inside the cabin proper while Connor sat halfway out the door next to one of the gunners, his feet on the runner bar.

Below him the jungle flashed by, a sea of green. Streams snaked like silver ribbons in steep ravines. As the valleys broadened low villages would appear. Above them, sunlight glinted off rice paddies terraced into the hillsides. And then as they got closer to the combat zone, there were acres of earth charred black by napalm. Even from their height Connor could breathe in the oily smell of kerosene, taste the smouldering peat of burnt timber.

'What are you looking for, mate?' Connor asked the door gunner, shouting over the thump-thump of the rotor blades.

The soldier remained motionless. His head was helmeted, with a visor that concealed his eyes and bulky headphones that covered his ears. Connor wasn't sure if he'd heard him, but after a moment the man spoke with the brashness he had found typical of a black American.

'I ain't see shit man. Best I hope for is them gooks don't shoot straight, maybe I check some movement and get a shot off at them before they get one on us.'

He shook his head.

'One in every two of these birds go down man, one in *every* two. We is sitting ducks.

You gotta flip a coin to see if I make it home man. Flip a fuckin coin.'

He spat, the gob of spittle somersaulting down and away in the helicopter's downdraft.

The Iroquois was ferrying Connor's unit to the frontline in support of a new push they were calling Operation Jefferson Glenn. He wondered who or what Jefferson Glenn was. No one seemed to know.

It was three days since left Da Nang. In the opinion of the seemingly knowledgeable soldiers whom Connor had found himself drinking with there, this was a decisive moment in the war. The North Vietnamese troops had advanced further south than ever before. If this new offensive could not be repulsed – and the talk was politicians in Washington DC and Canberra seemed reluctant to commit the manpower to make this possible – the NVA would continue rolling all the way to Saigon. The war, they said, could be over in six months. Maybe Connor would be home by Christmas. He had cheered at the thought.

It would be Lucinda's second Christmas. The previous year she had been too young to understand what was happening, and frankly their celebrations were so humble that even a grown up could be excused for failing to notice. But Rose seemed to think this year she would be different, she'd be more aware of things, certainly able to rip the wrapping off her presents. Rose wrote to him once a week, although Connor received the letters two or three at a time. In her neat handwriting she kept him up to date with the news from home. Local goings on, sports results and the like. But it was when she wrote of Lucinda that he most ached with homesickness. First it was his daughter

starting to talk, Rose recounting how their baby's growing range of sounds had slowly developed into proper words. Then it was her descriptions of Lucinda's attempts to walk which took up much of the pages. These early trials were now long behind her and the narratives now detailed Lucinda's astounding levels of mobility. It sounded like she was proving a real handful for her mother, Connor thought with a smile.

Rose's letters came to life when she talked of their daughter, but she seldom shared anything of herself. She would normally finish with a brief statement to say she was well, but missing him. The words that Connor so longed to read were clipped and formal. Despite being surrounded by the men in his battalion all day every day, he had never felt more alone, more homesick. He knew that it had been a mistake to come here, to take Regan's place.

'Excuse me my man'

The gunner pushed against Connor as he slid back to point his machine gun as far forward as it would pivot. The helicopter had begun to descend to a grassy plain that ran wide along the floor of a vast valley ringed by low scrubby mountains. Connor craned his head out the door to look up past the gunner. Ahead of them the low fog of warfare hung over the far end of the valley. Among the smoke, the red glow of fires burning and flashes of munitions fire.

The landing site was bordered by squat green military tents. There was a large one with a red cross emblazoned on its roof and Connor could see a line of stretcher beds laid out in front of it, each one occupied by an injured soldier, patched up sufficiently

to last the return trip strapped to the deck of this chopper and the others that followed it.

They landed, the helicopter's runners bouncing once off the grassy earth before they came to a tentative stop, hovering an inch off the ground. The pilot kept the engine at close to full throttle, eager to be reloaded with the wounded and return to the relative safety of the skies.

Connor leapt out the door and crouched low, running out from the twisting vortex of air under the helicopter's blades. Away from the noise of the chopper he could hear the pop of small arms and mortar, a tinny treble sound over the low bass of the larger artillery guns.

The CO called the men together to brief them.

'They need reinforcements urgently so don't get comfortable.' he said.

The terrain of this area was different to the dense jungle they had encountered on their first rotation, and they were able to make their way swiftly along the flat valley floor. The landscape reminded him a little of the countryside around Broken River, and as he marched Connor wondered whether there would ever be a time when he would have to fight on his home soil. He imagined taking up arms to protect his family against a foreign invader, how more vehemently he would fight to protect his own. *Maybe that's the reason this war can't be won.*

Suddenly bullets ripped past.

Only inches away, they hissed through the long grass and thudded into ground.

Connor threw himself down, knowing the foot high grass provided only visual cover. They had not been expecting enemy fire so soon and were exposed.

Ahead of him he heard the whoosh of mortar rounds being fired and felt the ground around him shudder from the impact. Fragments of dirt showered him like rain. It was clear the units ahead had been overrun. They were now the frontline.

'North, north-west. Two o'clock to our heading.' The distinctive voice of the Sergeant, his voice hoarse with the effort of screaming over the din.

It was quickly followed by another voice, this time the clipped shout of the CO.

'On my call... NOW! Fire!'

Connor rolled over onto his back and sat up into a crouch, lifting his line of sight above the grass and raising his rifle in the direction of the attack. He snapped out three short bursts, the weapon kicking into his shoulder, quickening his heartbeat. Other rifles around him sprang into life, and he could hear the wicked rattle of the unit's machine gun lighting up.

Peering up through the long strands of grass Connor's eyes traced the treeline to their north. He fired again, this time aiming the sight of his gun in the area from where he had seen a muzzle flash. He could hear the radio operator shouting their position into the handset.

'At least twelve minutes away' he yelled to no one in particular. The CO swore in response.

The clatter of their return fire had momentarily lapsed, the men distracted listening to the brief exchange. Now their guns roared into life again. Connor joined in, squeezing the trigger then changing his line of fire slightly between each to increase the coverage area.

There was another brief lapse as the men strained to hear an instruction that was being shouted out by the Captain.

'...men on my right side, led by Second Lieutenant Duggan. Regroup and on his command advance to the northern tree line. Men on my left get ready to provide cover'.

Duggan was a stocky Tasmanian with a broad smile and easy going manner who was well liked by the men. The smile was nowhere to be seen now, his face a study in concentration. He crawled through the grass, made eye contact with Connor and nodded his head in the direction of the enemy position.

'On my command' he said and Connor nodded his acknowledgement before Duggan crawled off to gather the other members of the assault force.

He straightened his legs out behind into a runner's crouch. A few seconds later he heard Duggan's cry.

Springing to his feet Connor began to sprint.

The cover of the trees was fifty yards away.

Knee-length grass tugged at his army fatigues as he ran, providing resistance, like running through shallow water.

Forty yards.

To his left and right a line of soldiers fanned out, green blurs in the corners of his eyes.
From behind him supporting gunfire rang out.

Thirty.

They had crossed roughly half the stretch of open ground when the return fire began.

Twenty Yards. *C'mon.*

The hiss of bullets passed close to him. Dull thuds as they hit the ground to his left and right, behind and in front. A man went down on his left. It wasn't possible to stop and check on him. Connor aimed his rifle in the vague direction of the North Vietnamese positions. He sprayed off a wild volley, shooting continuously until he heard the tinny click that told him the rifle's magazine was empty. Slinging it behind him and freeing his hands, he pumped his arms like a sprinter as he made for the trees.

Ten yards.

He was hit.

The ground rushed up towards him. A strange sensation of weightlessness.

Then the hard impact, driving the air from his lungs.

His eyes bulged open as he gasped to take a breath.

Then he was still.

The world grew quiet. And slow.

The sounds of bedlam surrounding him were distant, muffled. The long grass a curtain that shielding him from the chaos.

The sensation was nothing like what Connor thought it would be. The impact was broad, spanning across his upper body. More like being hit with a plank of wood than something only a quarter inch across.

He became aware that as he was all twisted around. His torso was flung spinning backwards, whilst his legs, seemingly unaware of what was happening above them, had continued to pump in the same direction. He had a sense of how silly he must look laid out like this, and compelled himself to move. With a groan of effort that brought the first wave of pain he flipped his upper body over so he lay flat on his back, the jagged sound of his breathing loud in his ears.

Slowly the air returned to his lungs and with it the full comprehension of what had occurred. There was a sudden conflict in his mind due to the absence of any significant pain and he suddenly thought that maybe he *hadn't* been shot. Reaching one hand up to his shoulder he patted around the thick cotton of his shirt, finding it hot and wet. Holding his hand in front of his face he saw it was stained red.

Connor closed his eyes but found no peace in the darkness of his head as strobes of white shot across his eyelids. The flashes matched the beat of his heart thudding through his eardrums and pulsating through the veins of his neck and his skull. Waves of dizziness passed over him.

Despite the effort of lifting his leaden eyelids he forced himself to keep them open.

Grass framed the sky. It weaved and shimmered gently in the breeze sweeping up the valley, impervious to the mayhem it was witness to. The sky was cold blue, and the thought struck Connor that it was *exactly* the same sky that hung in the air above Australia, above Broken River. The same sky that hung above his wife and child. He wondered if they might be looking at it too.

A voice in his head told him that if he just relaxed and made himself light he could float away on the breeze. Away from this place. Away from this hell. Back to them.

His eyelids were weighing heavy and he knew that he had to close them, but at the same time that same voice told him to keep them open, that if you could see the sky and the tips of the long grass then you couldn't be dead.

But soon the weight of his eyelids became too great.

He felt himself descending into the safety of darkness. He was going to a safe place. He was going away from bullets and shouting and anger and fear.

He was leaving his nightmares. The boy with all that blood coming from his head. Tiny Lulu lying crumpled in a heap. The ghost soldiers that were trying to kill him.

Connor opened his eyes briefly to see the sky was still there and when he closed them again he found that the drums were beating less frantically, their rhythm slowing. The strobes of light had slowed too. The effect was hypnotic, calming. Then the weightlessness he had been promised finally came and everything became peaceful and black.

Twenty-Two

Regan found a park directly in front of the Gold Coast City Council and gingerly pulled himself out from behind the driver's seat. He squinted away from the sun, the light burning his brain and adding to what he reckoned might be the world's worst hangover. *Fuckin Gold Coast, does it always have to be so sunny here?*

He had lost his sunglasses somewhere the previous night. He scratched the side of his head, wondering why he had put them on in the first place given it was dark when he arrived.

Oh yeah, that's right.

He rubbed a finger over his left eye and wiped a tear away with his sleeve. It was still weeping from where that bitch had jabbed her finger in it, but at least the pain had faded, replaced by the dull ache of his hangover.

He walked slowly to the boot, but was struck by a wave of nausea before he could open it. Placing both hands on the paintwork, something he normally avoided doing, he hung his head down, out of the light, and took in several long gulps of air.

'Are you alright mate?' came a man's voice from somewhere over his shoulder.

'Yeah, fuck off' he snapped in response.

'Excuse me?'

Regan sighed. *Why was the world fucking with him today?* He straightened and turned to face the voice.

'I said...' he began, but then swallowed back his words as he saw the light blue uniform of the Queensland Police Force.

'...ah, sorry mate. Feelin' a bit crook is all. Must a been something I ate'

'Yeah, whatever. Just watch your fucking language when you're talkin to the cops in future'

'Yeah, I sure will'

The copper shot him a dirty look and continued walking down the street. A solitary cloud moved overhead, temporarily blocking the sun. Regan felt a thousand times better.

He looked up at the Council Chambers, a sleek new building of glass and concrete. Twin palm trees lined the entrance. Regan had been impressed on his first visit, thinking it looked like something straight out of California, a real statement. The council offices in Sydney were pokey and drab by comparison and smelt mouldy, like a library.

He checked his watch. Five minutes to nine o'clock. He had always been on time for his meetings with Murdoch and felt a vague satisfaction that despite the state he was in today he had fronted up the same.

Fumbling in his pocket for the keys, he opened the boot.

It took a moment for him to realise that something was different. That something was missing.

Another moment passed before he realised that the yellow bag was gone.

His eyes scanned left and right.

He felt his stomach rise up.

'The back seat' he breathed to himself. He remembered now. He had put the bag on the backseat to stop the champagne rolling around.

He slammed the boot and opened the back door.

His green duffle bag sat on the back seat untouched from where he had left it. His eyes scanned the seats, the foot-wells.

The bag wasn't there either.

He got in on all fours and rooted around under the front seats. He lifted the green bag and looked underneath it, then inside. He climbed through into the front seats.

Nothing.

His heart was beating fast now, his head throbbing in tune with it. He rushed back round to the rear of the car, opened the boot again, his hands groping around inside. He lifted the carpet from the floor, but of course there was only room for the spare wheel underneath and nothing else.

He checked his watch. Nine o'clock exactly. *Shit.*

He searched the car's interior again. The back then the front. He even began to look in places the bag wouldn't even fit – the glove box, the centre console – before he stopped himself. Then once more in the boot, refusing to believe it was gone.

Finally he stepped away from the car and slumped down to sit on the lawn of the Council Chambers. The grass was perfectly manicured, soft and spongy, but Regan was in no mood to enjoy it. His breathing came in short pants like a thirsty dog, his head reeled. He felt dizzy and sick and couldn't think properly.

The previous night had become somewhat of a blur after he had left Rose's. The second bottle of bubbly was gone before he reached the Queensland border so he stopped at a bottle-o in Coolangatta for a hipflask of Bundy. And that was all but finished before he reached Surfers.

He remembered vaguely checking into a motel. Then there were pubs, and clubs and finally the titty bars. But the bag? Surely the bag remained safely in the car. There was no way he would have removed it. Or did he?

He checked his watch, almost five past now. Murdoch would be waiting.

He stood up and smoothed down his clothes, brushing grass from the seat of his strides then walked with as much confidence as he could muster between the twin palms and up into the Council's building. Empty handed.

The foyer was air-conditioned and Regan felt the sweat chill on his skin. It caused him to shiver but at least his head felt a little better out of the heat.

Murdoch was waiting, sitting on a black leather chair in the public waiting area. As Regan approached he stood, glanced at his watch.

'You're late'

He was a heavy set man, with a belly that protruded out and down from between the lapels of his suit jacket like a heavily pregnant woman. His hair was thinning and held stiffly in place across his forehead with pomade.

'I'm sorry I got caught in some traffic and...'

Murdoch ignored him and turned to walk down the long carpeted corridor to his office, where their transaction normally took place. But then he turned back to face Regan. He placed his hands on his hips, pushing his belly out further. He looked down to Regan's hands.

'Where's the bag?'

'The bag?' Regan stammered. 'Ah yes the bag. It's been delayed. My associate was bringing it and he's been... delayed'

'I don't like delays' Murdoch said, his voice a low growl.

'Yes, no. I... I'm sure.' Regan rubbed his hands together nervously.

'I don't like delays any more than your boss Mister Sheldon likes delays. And of course one delay often leads to another.' His lips retreated into a nasty grin. 'If you understand me'

'Yes, but this is not a delay of course...'

Murdoch raised his bushy eyebrows causing a splinter of his pomaded fringe to peel off his forehead.

'...what I mean is... this delay is only temporary. I'll be back with the delivery. Soon'

Murdoch stepped in close and Regan could smell the staleness of his breath.

'Now listen here you punk. I don't like delays and I don't like your excuses and most of all I don't like being fucked around.'

'Of course' Regan's voice was little more than a whisper. 'Sorry'

Murdoch peered at Regan's weepy, bloodshot eye. He stepped back and looked Regan up and down.

'Does your boss know about this... delay?'

'Mister Sheldon? Yes of course.' He could feel a drip of cold sweat sliding down his neck. 'I was just on the phone with him a few minutes ago. I can tell you he is just as upset about this as you'

'I'm not upset' Murdoch snarled, 'I don't get upset. It's Frank Sheldon that will be upset if you're not back here before the close of business with my *money*'

Regan gulped and nodded.

Murdoch pointed to the entrance.

'Those doors are locked at five. You'd better be walking back through them before then'

Regan nodded again.

'Now... fuck off'

Murdoch turned and shuffled away down the corridor.

The motel Regan found himself in earlier that morning was a two-story strip of units constructed in a mock Tudor style. He sped down the highway and tried to recall the name of it. The sign boards of motel after motel flashed by. *Palms Motel. Sun City Lodge. Acapulco Inn.*

The shock of the missing bag had done little to clear his muddled head. His movements of the last twelve hours were largely a mystery. He had had woken fully clothed, face down in a motel room he couldn't remember seeing the inside of before. He had a vague recollection of checking in the previous evening, but remembered little else.

Strangely it was this thought that gave Regan some hope. Surely the bag's disappearance was innocent. Even in his drunken state he would have been aware of his responsibilities, would have taken it safely inside his unit. Then in the morning he left in a hurry, not thinking he brought it inside.

Yes, it was obvious. The bag was back in his motel unit. He would return to the Council within the hour and all would be well.

The line of motels continued uninterrupted along both sides of the highway. He passed the *Sunshine Motor Inn, Surfers Resort, the Sleep Inn* and a dozen more before he saw it. *Camelot Court.*

He pulled the wheel hard, cut across two lanes and clipped up over the kerb before screeching to a halt in the car-park.

A fat woman who looked vaguely familiar emerged from the small office on the ground floor, her hair in curlers. She was the manageress, he assumed, and she looked shitty with him but he didn't know why. Maybe he had been rude to her the night before. It was more than likely.

She approached him with her arms folded across herself, her eyes bright with irritation.

'You'll mark the bloody concrete doing that' she announced to him.

'What?'

She pointed. Regan looked down to see the foot long skid marks he had left. 'Oh yeah, right, sorry. Look, I left something in my room. I need to get it'

The woman shook her head. 'No.'

'What do you mean, no?'

'We've already cleaned your room, room five and there was nothing left'

Regan moved towards the manageress who took a defensive step backwards.

'Just give me the keys and let me check'

'I don't have the keys.' She glanced up to the second floor landing. Regan followed her gaze and saw the maid's trolley, a motley juggernaut of mops, brooms and

precariously stacked piles of towels. He pushed passed the fat woman and began striding up the stairs, two at a time.

The maid was cleaning room six. He startled her as he barged through the half open door, causing her to drop the teacups she was stacking neatly next to the electric jug. They careered across the small bench like spinning tops. She was a foreigner of some sort with dark hair pulled back tightly against her scalp with pins. She wore a faded pink tunic speckled with bleach.

'Next door' Regan barked at her. 'Did you clean next door?'

'Yes sir' she nodded furiously. 'Next door is clean. I just clean. Is there problem?'

Behind him he could hear the manageress in the doorway, panting with the effort of following Regan up the stairs.

'I told him Maria that you cleaned number five and there was nothing left in the room'

Maria nodded again. 'Yes, the room was empty sir'

'The key?' Regan held his hand out and snapped his fingers. 'Give me the key'

Maria looked over Regan's shoulder to her boss, then rummaged in her pocket and held out a key attached to a chunky green plastic key-ring. Regan snatched it from her and stepped back past the manageress onto the landing.

Room five was spotless and smelt of bleach. After scanning the open expanses of the room, Regan opened the wardrobes, flinging spare pillows and blankets out onto the floor. As the two women appeared in the doorway to watch him he got down on all

fours and looked under the bed. Standing, he tore the covers off the bed and tossed them on the floor.

'Mamma mia' said the maid.

'Now look here...' started the manageress.

Regan ignored them and moved into the small bathroom, looking in the drawers under the sink, and pulling back the shower curtain.

Nothing.

The yellow bag wasn't there.

Out into the room again he glared at the maid.

'You' he said and pointed at her. She recoiled as if shot and stood to attention, fear in her eyes. 'Did you see a yellow sports bag in this room?'

She shook her head furiously. 'No sir, I promise sir. Room was empty...'

'And you' he pointed now at the fat manageress. 'Did I have a bag with me when I arrived here last night?'

She looked back at him belligerently 'The only thing you had with you last night was a near finished bottle of rum'

Regan looked from one woman to the other as the realisation sunk in that they were telling the truth.

The small bar fridge kicked into life, its compressor forcing out a dull drone.

He walked out to the landing, the women stepping back and clear of him. He put his hands on the steel railing and leaned forward, trying desperately to think. He could feel the anxiety rising inside him.

'You left your car unlocked with half the windows down. I told you to lock it up when you were going out, but you were in no mood to listen to me' the manageress said.

Regan slumped forward further, resting his elbows on the railing and letting his head fall into his hands. *What a fool.* He had left a bag full of money on the backseat of his car, with the windows down and the doors unlocked.

'If you think it's been stolen you should contact the Police' the manageress offered.

Regan emitted a laugh, high-pitched and thin like a kookaburra.

With his head still hanging forward he walked away from the women down the steps to his car. He could see Frank Sheldon sitting behind his desk under a halo of cigarette smoke.

His words were ringing in Regan's ears.

Guard it as if your life depends on it. Because it almost certainly does.

Regan walked up and down the main streets of Surfers, holding onto to some insane hope that he would see the yellow bag sitting on the pavement, still full of money, or that some memory might be triggered that would lead him to it. Flashes of yellow taunted him from every angle.

The further he went the slower he became. A dead man's walk.

Then he drove to Sydney. He didn't know what else to do and there seemed little point in staying in the Gold Coast. As he drove he racked his brain for some clue as to the whereabouts of the bag. But he had to conclude it was gone.

He drove through Broken River without stopping, brushing a tear away from his weepy eye. *This is all that bitch's fault.*

It would be early evening by the time he reached Sydney. He felt certain that Ray Murdoch would be on the phone to Frank Sheldon right on the dot of five. And that was if he hadn't already phoned him. Either way Sheldon would know of the missing money before Regan got back and was able to tell him himself.

He had made it as far as Coffs Harbour before he decided on a course of action.

He had to front up. He would tell Frank Sheldon what had happened and face the music.

The money had been *stolen* from him, after all. It could have happened to anyone. And he would repeat back to Frank Sheldon one of his oft used expressions – *You fuck it, you fix it* – and make clear that it was his intention to repay every cent of the money, no matter how long it took for the debt to be cleared.

The clarity around his decision felt so good Regan pulled off the road into a truck-stop with the intention of calling his boss and breaking the news then and there. He got as far as dialling the number, but on the first ring he hung up. Surely this sort of news was best delivered in person. Yes, he would drive straight to the offices of Sheldon

Investments and tell him face to face. Frank Sheldon often stayed at the office until late, as did William James, and, given the circumstances, he felt certain they would be there tonight.

Regan hadn't eaten all day and was feeling light headed, so he bought a pie from the servo. As he pulled back on the highway he removed the wrapper and took a bite. When he felt the heat on his groin he realised the bottom had fallen out of the pie sending the filling spilling down his front and into his lap.

He roared in anger and flung it out the window.

It just wasn't his day.

The call from Councillor Ray Murdoch had come just after nine that morning.

Frank Sheldon listened quietly for most of the call. Murdoch sounded calm, reporting in a matter-of-fact way what had occurred an hour earlier when Regan had arrived without the all-important yellow bag. Sheldon was thankful for this. In his experience men in Murdoch's position – petty bureaucrats that wielded considerable power – would be bristling with the effects of a bruised ego. More concerned about being shown-up than the loss of money that wasn't yet theirs after all, and therefore not theirs to lose.

When Frank Sheldon finally spoke it was to assure him that he appreciated what the Right Honourable Councillor was doing for them and would have someone there with the payment by nine the following morning. He placed the phone down gently and

gazed silently through the smoke-glass windows. Behind him William James appeared, a sixth sense alerting him to the problem. Frank Sheldon addressed him without turning.

'Mister James I need you to make another withdrawal from the bank for Councillor Murdoch. I need you to personally take it to him. You will meet him at nine tomorrow on the Gold Coast.'

He turned, the heavy leather office chair moving silently on its bearings.

'I can't afford a second fuck up' he added simply by way of explanation.

'Of course Mister Sheldon, I'll leave straight away.' He paused and cleared his throat.

'Should I send for Elias?'

Frank Sheldon didn't answer for some time, his gaze high over his accountant's shoulder, as if he expected the ceiling panels to yield an answer to the question. Finally he nodded.

'And William? Cancel my meetings for today please.'

After William James had left, Frank Sheldon turned again to gaze out the window. He felt a sense of deep melancholy come over him, one that he had not felt for many years. It wasn't the probable loss of a bag of money that troubled him, even though the amount of five thousand dollars was not a trifling sum, even for a man with Sheldon's means. What was causing him distress ran far deeper.

He was going to have to break his vow. A vow he made almost twenty years ago.

'Excuse me sir, you call for me?'

Elias stood in the doorway. Alongside him was Micky, a young redhead with a map of Ireland's worth of freckles on his face. From what filtered back to Sheldon via William James it sounded like Micky enjoyed some of the more physical aspects of his work a little too much.

'I want you to find Regan. I want you to find *that cunt* and bring him to me.'

It was after eight o'clock by the time Regan crossed the harbour bridge and started snaking his way through the inner city to the office of Sheldon Investments. A light rain was falling and the streets were quiet. A few office workers hurried under umbrellas to catch trains and buses to the suburbs. As he crossed through Hyde Park Regan saw a homeless man trying to rearrange cardboard boxes into a shelter under a tree.

The lights on level ten were on, just as Regan knew they would be. Through rain streaked windows he counted the floors anyway, just to be sure.

He parked outside, but left the engine running, his hands locked on the steering wheel. After a minute he reached down to the ignition, but as soon as his fingers touched the key he recoiled from it, as if it were scolding hot, and quickly brought his hand back up to the safety of the wheel.

C'mon Regan, just man up and get in there. It'll be ok.

He reached down and turned the key, the engine dying with a splutter.

Surely they would accept his explanation, acknowledge his failings as an act of stupidity rather than dishonesty. He could sit with William James and thrash out some sort of arrangement for him to pay back the money, present it to Mister Sheldon the next day. With James' involvement the boss's approval of such an arrangement would be a rubber stamping exercise.

He listened to the engine tick and cool. With his hands still on the steering wheel he took a number of deep breaths.

Finally he got out of the car, slammed the door and started towards the building's entrance. Then he stopped and returned to the car to lock it. *Talk about closing the bloody gate after the horse has bolted.* Once back at the car with the key sticking in the lock he froze, unable to decide whether to lock the car, or open the door, get back inside and drive off.

C'mon Regan, it'll be ok. It always turns out ok.

But what if it wasn't ok? He had seen enough beatings meted out in his time and wondered if he would be next. Would Elias do it? Better him than Micky that angry Irish prick. Surely he could expect the big Lebanese to go easy on him? He wouldn't exactly call it a friendship, but they spent some time together, albeit mostly in the silence that Elias seemed to prefer. Hopefully if he did cop a hiding Elias would go about his task in such a way to ensure Regan would carry the signs of his punishment – maybe a black eye, some cuts, maybe even a broken nose – but nothing more serious.

He wondered where would they take him if he did have to cop it? They would never do it here in the office; it was a respectable business at a corporate address. Sheldon

Investments owned a number of inner-city properties, including building sites, derelict houses and warehouses all of which ideal for beating a man senseless and leaving him. Regan should know, after all he and Elias had driven to plenty of such locations on nights just like this. Except it was Regan at the wheel driving while Elias sat in the backseat alongside some snivelling mongrel who had crossed them.

As he stood beside the car Regan could feel his legs begin to shake. He stomped his feet on the pavement but a moment later the shuddering was back. Then suddenly the front door of the foyer shot open. Regan threw himself down and out of sight behind the car. His whole body was shaking now. He peered up over the window sill to see some bloody businessman in a suit scurrying off down the street.

But it was enough for him to change his mind.

He couldn't walk into the building, wait for the lift, hum along to the piped music, stroll into the office and calmly tell Frank Sheldon what had happened to his money.

With shaking fingers he removed his keys from the door, opened it and snaked his body into the driver's seat. He turned the ignition and without another glance in the direction of the building pushed the car into gear and drove away.

It took Regan only a few minutes to pack.

From under his bed he removed an envelope with his life's savings – \$375.

He was about to leave when a soft knock sounded on the door.

He remained still, silent, hoping that it was only his imagination.

The knock came again, louder this time, more urgent.

His eyes flicked to the window. Regan's room was on the second floor of the boarding house, below its sole window was an overgrown yard with nothing in it but a clothes line. Nothing to break his fall. Chances were he couldn't jump down without breaking a leg or at least spraining an ankle. But it was surely better than the alternative.

He had begun tip-toeing to the window when the knock came a third time.

'Regan love, are ye there?'

It was Mrs McMillan, his landlady.

Regan kept his foot behind the door when he opened it, until he was able to confirm she was on her own.

'Ah, I thought ye was in there' said his landlady in her soft Scottish brogue.

'Yes, sorry I didn't hear you at first.'

'Aye, no problem. I've got a phone message for ye love.'

Regan stiffened. 'Is it from my boss? A Mister Sheldon?'

Mrs McMillan smiled and shook her head.

'No love, it was a man calling from the army asking for Mister Thorn. Said it was with regards your brother. Said you could call back at any time'

She handed him a square of paper with a number scrawled on it.

'I do hope everything is alright' she added, clasping her hands together.

Regan took the piece of paper and nodded.

'May I use your phone Mrs McMillan?'

She frowned. 'Well you know I don't normally let borders use my phone...'

'...except in the case of emergency' Regan finished her sentence. 'You know my brother's in Vietnam'

'Oh dear. Well in the circumstances I think it will be ok. Will you come down now love?'

Regan nodded and stepped into the corridor closing the door behind him.

The army answered the phone after three rings.

Regan wasn't thinking at first, and when he told them it was Regan Thorn calling it caused some confusion until he twigged.

'No sorry, let me clarify. My name is Connor Thorn. I am ringing about my brother Regan.'

He turned away and mumbled into the wall as best he could, mindful that Mrs McMillan was standing only a few feet away, hovering over an armchair but not sitting in it, her hands clasped tightly together. She made no pretence of giving him any privacy.

Now as he listened to the voice down the phone it was all he could do to stop himself smiling.

'Yes, of course... Yes I understand... Day after tomorrow, that's the Sunday? Yes no problems, ten o'clock. I'll be there.'

He realised a solution to his problems had just landed in his lap.

Spring

Twenty-Three

The days became longer as spring finally arrived.

The change of seasons brought days of high winds. They gusted in cold from the south. The window panes of the cottage rattled and the roofing iron creaked. The wind lifted soil off dry paddocks and carried it high into the sky in dirty clouds.

Rose wrapped Lucinda tightly and covered her own face with a scarf as she walked down to the estuary. She had not gone to collect cockles since earlier in the year, and starting the ritual again after the winter months passed made it feel like summer had arrived. Or at least that she was encouraging it to do so.

As usual Lucinda had fallen asleep with the movement of the walk. Rose placed her in the same spot at the base of the Morton Bay Fig, in the natural cradle of its exposed roots.

It was only after Rose had rolled up the legs of her old overalls and had begun to wade out into the icy water that a flash of white further along the estuary shore caught her eye. It looked like a sprinkle of confetti or spilled paint, unlikely as that was. As Rose drew near she could see that it was shells. A pile of empty cockle shells.

She picked one up and let her fingers trace its shape; first the fine ridges on the outside, then the smooth and pearl-like surface of its concave interior. It felt wet to her touch and when she looked inside Rose saw the tiny disk of the clam's muscle was still attached to the inside of the shell. Still wet. Fresh.

She dropped the shell and picked up another, finding the same thing. If the shells were more than a few days old any flesh remaining on them would be gone, dried out in the sun or consumed by the minute creatures that lived in the silt of the estuary's floor.

Then she saw footprints. They came out of the estuary, appearing at the high tide mark. Rose's gaze went with them, to an old tree stump halfway up the steep embankment. There were more empty shells scattered at its base. From there the footprints returned to the foot of the embankment and continued along the sandy beach than ran along the shoreline.

Still clasping a cockle shell Rose followed the footprints. In the wetter sand close to the waterline they were well defined. She made to place her foot inside one, but stopped herself. Instead she placed her foot alongside it. The footprints were far larger than hers. A man's foot.

Rose shadowed the footprints until they petered out at the base of the cutting that led up towards the cottage.

The walk to the MacGregor homestead on the neighbouring farm took Rose twenty minutes.

Andy and Mary MacGregor long ago ceased farming their land, the cattle grazing there belonged to another local farmer who leased their paddocks.

Mary greeted Rose warmly and fawned over Lucinda, scurrying off to boil the kettle and insisting they stay for tea and cake. After getting up to greet her with a smile and a

bear-like handshake Andy returned to his armchair in the corner of the room to immerse himself in the newspaper, happy to let the women talk. When Mary left again to make the tea Rose cleared her throat to address him.

'Andy?'

'Hmmm' answered the old farmer absently from behind his newspaper.

'Would I be able to borrow a shotgun?'

He lowered the newspaper and peered out into the room over the rim of his reading glasses, as if wondering who had just spoken.

'Just for a day or two' Rose continued. 'There's a dog hanging around. Gone wild I think. It wouldn't worry me normally, but with Lucinda running around now... well I just don't want to take the risk'

Andy nodded solemnly and folded his newspaper.

'Why don't I come over and sort it for you?' He smiled, kind eyes disappearing into the soft creases of his cheeks. 'My hands aren't as steady as they used to be, but I'm sure I can still hit a mongrel dog at twenty yards'

Mary appeared at the doorway, wringing a tea-towel in her hands.

'Yes dear, why don't you let Andy do it. Shooting things is a man's job, and with your Connor away...' she tapered off. 'Besides, he needs something to do, don't you dear?'

'Apart from trying to read my newspaper in peace?' he squinted in the direction of his wife with a wry smile.

Rose grabbed Lucinda who was making a beeline for a cabinet containing Mary's collection of souvenir spoons. She pulled the child up on to her lap.

'Honestly Andy' she said, 'the dog's only been round once or twice and I've not seen it for a couple of days now. It may have moved on. If you came over you might be waiting for days and still not see it.'

'You're making it sound more like a holiday now, might be just what I need.'

Mary gave a low tut and shook her head but she was smiling too as she disappeared back into the kitchen.

'Thanks Andy, I appreciate it. But if you didn't mind just loaning me the gun and a couple of cartridges that would be great.'

Andy nodded his assent as Mary returned with tea and a plate overflowing with shortcake.

Two cups of tea and one hour later Rose left, having miraculously preventing Lucinda from damaging any of Mary's ornaments despite the child's best efforts. She carried her daughter, now it seemed too exhausted to walk, cradled in one arm, the shotgun slung over the other.

Twenty-Four

Connor arrived at Kingsford Smith airport in Sydney in a daze.

He hadn't slept on the eleven hour flight from Saigon and his eyes were dry and stinging. As he walked down long corridors he blinked and tried to focus on the surroundings and felt like he was dreaming. Along the walls advertising posters showed people – smiling and good-looking – enjoying Chivas whiskey, Pall Mall cigarettes and day excursions to the Blue Mountains. From behind a boarded off area came the rattle of a jackhammer, the noise vibrating through Connor's skull, stinging his injured shoulder.

The main terminal was brightly lit, modern and quiet. As he waited in line at customs the air-conditioning chilled his arms and it felt like he had gone from a place of fire to one made of ice. The customs officers were uniformly white, their faces clean and well-fed. He was moved through quickly on a line reserved for servicemen.

In the arrivals hall people leaned expectantly over the barriers. As the automatic doors slid closed behind him, Connor slowed his stride, looking for a familiar face in the crowd. He knew it was unlikely that Rose would have made the journey down, but couldn't help but hold onto hope that she might be there, waiting for him.

The hall was busy. Fathers, mothers, wives, friends. Their glances flicked over Connor quickly, tension evident on many faces. A cycle of hope and disappointment each time the doors slid open to reveal another arriving passenger that was not their loved one.

Others lingered on Connor for longer; taking in the army uniform, the bandages visible above his collar line, the starched white sling in which he carried his arm. He tried to read their expressions. Gratitude? Sympathy? Anger? Their stares forced him to look away.

He looked instead down at the children. Bright eyed and dressed in their best, waiting just as impatiently as their parents. They hung from the barrier rail like monkeys, or twisted around its poles. A high-pitched squeal, howling, tears. He wondered for a moment if Lucinda was one of them; his heart lifted at the thought. He wondered if he would be able to recognise her if she was.

He walked slowly along towards the exit, looking one face to the next. Once he reached the end of the line he had to accept that there was no-one there to greet him. Not Rose. Not even Regan.

He could see a small group of soldiers attired like Connor in their army dress uniform. They were off the same flight and were standing in a row, waiting patiently for their turn with a woman he assumed was the Army liaison officer they had been told to report to.

Connor walked over and joined the end of the line.

As he waited he watched the reunions taking place.

A woman hugged her soldier husband and sobbed, refusing to let him go. He buried his head in her shoulder, his face disappearing into her long hair.

Three children ran out to meet a man that must have been their father, ducking under the barrier, like they were invading the field after a footy match. Their mother yelled for the children to wait then she too clambered awkwardly under the railing and ran out to join the huddle with her husband at the centre.

An older couple, far more constrained, met at the end of the exit path. Their kiss was polite, tentative, but there was no escaping the love in their eyes, and Connor followed them with his eyes as they walked away to the car park, not speaking, just holding hands.

He rubbed his shoulder. It was aching, and he slipped his arm out of its sling and stretched it out, squinting at the pain. He reached up under his shirt sleeve to the hollow in the side of his chest where the two bullets had struck. He let his fingers trace the outline of the scar, the skin prickly and hot where it had been stitched across to cover the wound.

'Next!'

The soldier in front of him moved away. Connor stepped forward, dragging his army issue bag along the floor behind him.

The army liaison was typical of the few women Connor had encountered in the armed forces. She had masculine features, thin brown hair cropped short at the shoulders. A baggy shirt and trousers effectively concealed any hint of her female shape.

'Connor Thorn' he said.

Without looking at him she began to scan the list. The glasses she wore perched halfway down her nose would have suited an older woman. As she looked down through them her face became elongated, as if she had eaten something sour. She flicked the dog-eared pages of her list over with a snap of her wrist, and curled them around the back of her clipboard.

'My brother was supposed to be here to collect me'

'I've got a Regan Thorn' she said, peering at him doubtfully over the rims of her glasses.

Connor looked back blankly for a moment before recovering his composure.

'Yes, sorry. Regan Thorn's *my* name' he smiled. 'Connor's my brother. He's supposed to be picking me up. Like I said'

The woman shook her head in exasperation.

'It says here that your brother left something for you'

She lifted the pages of her list up and removed a brown envelope that was wedged into the clipboard behind them. She handed it to him.

He saw it had *THORN* written on it in Regan's distinctive handwriting.

'Next!'

Connor ordered a cup of coffee from the airport café and took a table. While waiting for it he opened the envelope.

It contained two keys, one for a car, the other a door key. There was a letter inside.

The coffee arrived and Connor took a sip. It was instant coffee – thin and weak – but it was a taste of home and he savoured it. The coffee in Vietnam was boiled from coarsely ground beans and was very strong and bitter, the last half an inch of the cup a thick brown sludge.

Taking another sip, he unfolded the letter and began to read.

Dear Connor,

Welcome Home. Sorry I'm not there to greet you in person but I have been called out of town on important business.

I'll be back in Sydney in a couple of days and I can drive you up home then. I've spoken to Rose on the phone to let her know of your return, and of course she is eager to see you but also happy for you to enjoy a few days in Sydney, to get out and about, relax, have a few beers.

I've left you the keys to my car which you'll find in the airport car park, just opposite the entrance. The other key is for my flat, I'm sure you'll remember your way there. Feel free to wear any of my clothes – I wouldn't recommend wandering round town in your army gear.

See you soon,

R.

Connor finished his coffee, folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. He took the keys and put them in his pocket.

At the information desk they directed him to a line of public phones, tucked down a side corridor. He continued to the last phone, dragging his bag behind him along the polished floor.

After inserting a handful of coins he dialled. Listened to the clicks as the line opened.

When a tone finally came back down the earpiece it was not the long rattle of a ringing phone, rather the short angry peeps to indicate a disconnected line.

He placed the handset down. The coins fell jangling into the return slot.

Fishing around in his bag he located his wallet. Inside he saw Rose and Lucinda smiling up at him, and he ran his thumb absently over the scuffed plastic sleeve. He slid his finger behind it and removed a square of cardboard upon which were written his home phone number.

He looked down at the number and was sure that this was the same number he'd just rung. He inserted the coins again and carefully re-dialled the number.

The same series of short angry pips pulsed back at him from down the line. Frowning he hung up the phone and made his way out to the car-park.

He found the car easily enough. To his surprise he found it had a full tank of gas.

At first he didn't think he'd be able to drive. Until it healed his left arm was rendered useless, the muscles in his shoulder shredded by the bullets that struck just below the

ball. There was no way he had enough strength in it to move the gear stick. But after sitting in the driver's seat for a few minutes he worked out if he loosened the sling and let his left hand lay across his lap, he could grip the steering wheel with this hand while he reached his right arm across to change gears.

It was a little goofy, but it worked and soon he was driving out of the car park, accelerating off down Southern Cross Drive towards the city.

Regan had written the address of his flat on the back of the letter, but Connor was happy to drive around for a bit. The sun was shining and the air smelt like Australia.

He felt a little hurt that Rose hadn't wanted to see him straight away. That's if what Regan put in his letter was to be believed. Connor hadn't been in contact with her for weeks. He lay in the army hospital in Saigon staring at the ceiling and longing to phone home. But the doctors wouldn't let him out of bed. When the army officials visited and told him he would be shipped back home as soon as his wounds had healed sufficiently for him to travel he wanted to share the news with Rose, or at least check that she knew what was happening. But the army only had the name of Connor Thorn down in their records as next of kin. When finally the doctors decided he was well enough to leave his bed, the army officials returned with his flight details for departure that very day. It seemed if you were fit enough to walk, you were fit enough to be on the next plane back to Australia and out of the army's hair.

The officials confirmed they had spoken with his brother and that he agreed to meet him in Sydney when he arrived. But what of Rose? At the airport in Saigon to he managed to duck off and ring the number of the cottage. But the phone had rung

without being answered. That was only yesterday. Why would the number be disconnected now?

He drove with no destination in mind, no route in his head, steering the car aimlessly through the crowded city streets. He went up George Street, past the entrance to the main train station, one of the few Sydney landmarks he recognised. He thought for a moment about stopping, leaving the car, and getting the next train up north, but drove on.

Finally he found himself outside the guest house where Regan lived. It was only six months since he last stayed there, when he came to Sydney for his Nana's funeral. His head filled with a blur of memories. A blur of neon lights at the Cross. Watching the conscription draw. Standing with Regan on the beach, making a decision. It seemed like a different place, another time.

He parked right outside the guest house, but decided not to go in. There was a pub at the end of the road, opposite the Woolloomooloo wharves.

As he walked down the street he saw a red head kid sitting in a parked car. The kid was staring straight at him. Connor looked away, but when he looked back the kid was still gawking. It wasn't just an idle stare either; there was an intensity, a loathing to it. The kid was not familiar but there was something in that stare that was. It was the same look that many of the local men in Vietnam directed his way.

As he arrived in front of the pub he wondered if it was such a good idea to go for a beer. If some red haired kid was giving him the evils for just walking down the street, what was he going to encounter inside? He'd heard stories in Vietnam about guys

going home, being spat on, abused or given the cold shoulder. Mainly from Americans, but if what he heard was true the sentiment against the war was rising all the time in Australia too.

He looked down at his army issue dress uniform, and thought for a moment about returning to Regan's and getting changed. Then he remembered the nylon trousers and flashy patterned shirts that made up his brother's wardrobe, and smiled to himself. *Better a baby killer than a ponce I reckon.*

He stepped in out of the sunlight up to a set of double doors, frosted glass etched with a Toohey's logo. He pushed on the worn brass plate and stepped into the pub's cool interior. In the gloom of blue cigarette smoke he could make out groups of men standing around tall leaner tables, many dressed in the grey overalls of port workers. None so much as looked up as Connor made his way to the bar.

'G'day mate, what are you having?'

The barman was a tall man with snowy hair and a stooped back. He made his way to Connor wiping the counter-top with a grubby cloth.

'Schooner of Toohey's thanks.'

The barman nodded at Connor's attire as he poured from the tap into an ice-cold glass.

'You just got home soldier?'

'Yeah. Got in this morning. Vietnam.'

'Yeah I figured.' He slid the glass over the bar. 'Is this your first beer?'

Connor nodded. 'Sure is'

'Well then it's on the house.'

It had become a decent session. The barman was a good bloke, Connor reckoned, and told him not to worry about any long haired louts that might give him grief out on the streets.

'They're all hippies and layabouts' he said. 'I'll listen to a man's opinion when he cuts his hair and holds down a job, otherwise they can get stuffed.'

The men who filled the bar as the afternoon turned to evening were all working men who cut their hair and Connor felt at home. He could have been drinking with Steve and the boys in Broken River after a shift at the mill.

At one point a big swarthy bloke dressed in a suit and tie walked into the bar. He stood out, not just for the suit but for the fact he was a foreigner of some sort. Middle Eastern would have been Connor's guess. He glanced around the room, and when his gaze reached Connor it seemed to linger for a moment, a flash of recognition spreading on the man's face. But just as quickly as he appeared in the doorway he was gone again, and Connor ordered another beer.

When the barman finally rang the bell for last orders Connor was drunk, despite eating a couple of pies round dinner time. He wondered if it was the painkilling pills the doctors had given him.

He gave the barman a farewell shout and made his way to the door.

Outside the evening was cool, the smell of seawater drifting off the harbour. Connor removed his arm from the sling and stretched it out, the pain less noticeable now. He began walking up the hill.

In the half-light he saw the flash of a match being struck.

Ahead of him two men were leaning on the bonnet of a car. As Connor neared they stepped onto the footpath. He looked up and to his surprise realised he recognised both of them. The little red-haired kid. The swarthy bloke from the pub. He stopped short. Neither of them looked like anti-war activists, but it was clear that they were waiting for him.

They stood facing each other, only metres apart. The red head took a long drag on a cigarette.

'Can I help you gentlemen' Connor said finally, breaking the impasse. He could hear a mild slur in his voice.

'This gunna go one a two ways' said the big swarthy bloke, his voice dull and heavily accented.

A slap as the red head thrust a fist into his palm. Both men took a step closer.

'Look I don't know what you fellas want, but...'

Connor didn't get to finish. The fist hit him low, underneath where his arm hung in its sling. The blow seemed to force his sternum up into his chest, pushing the air clean out of him.

He stumped down on his knees, trying to fill his lungs.

Then he was picked up. Two hands on his shirt. One grabbed him by the hair, a sharp tug of pain on his scalp.

The street flashed past. Picket fences and rubbish bins and cars and the pavement rushed underneath and around him.

Then he was lifted and dropped. His hip and side made a hollow clank as he landed. Pain shot out of his wounded shoulder. He gave a muffled yell. He looked up and could see the night sky. It was framed in a rectangle and when he looked more closely he recognised the shape's outline. A car boot.

A giant set of arms reached over and slammed the lid.

Connor was plunged into darkness.

Twenty-Five

For the first time since she had moved into the cottage Rose locked the doors and windows.

Many of the clasps were rusted and she had to tap them with a hammer to get them to close. The lock on the back door cracked as she turned the key.

Then, satisfied that the house was secure Rose hurried about making herself and Lucinda a sandwich for their dinner.

She wondered if she was imagining things. For one, the bread loaf seemed smaller than when she had left it. The knife cuts through it were coarser and on more of an angle than those she would make. So too the block of cheese was diminished in size, ever so slightly. A faint smudge that could have been a dirty fingerprint marked its side.

She left Lucinda to chew, or at least play with, the bite size pieces of cheese sandwich she had made for her and, shotgun in hand walked through the house.

She looked under the bed, in the cupboards. Behind the doors and amongst the junk and boxes in the spare room.

She put Lucinda to bed then sat in her armchair trying to read. But she was unable to focus on the words.

The wind continued to gust outside. Every clank of the roof iron, creak of the weatherboards or rattle of the window made her jump. She went to the window in the front room and looked outside. There was no moon and the night was dark. She could see nothing but the light from the house ghosting off the trees in the yard, long black shadows behind them.

She sat back in the armchair, knocking her book to the floor. She tucked her feet underneath her, her toes cold from the bare floorboards.

It was Regan. She knew it was him.

Ever since the night she jabbing her thumb in his eye she had been waiting for his return. Then she had been up all night, ears pricked for the sound of his car, not speeding madly down the drive as when he left, but moving slowly and deliberately as if he wished to crush each piece of gravel under its tyres individually.

As the hours had turned days, the days became a week she had begun to believe that he wouldn't return. But deep down she knew he would be back.

At first she had told herself that it could just as easily be a chancer, someone down on their luck, sleeping rough and pilfering food. But there was something deep within, a sixth sense, which told her he was near.

The wind was stronger now, a shrill whistle. And beneath it a thump. She listened, all her awareness craning for that sound. A moment when she wondered if she'd imagined it. Then. Again. The same dull thump.

It sounded like it was coming from outside.

Rose picked up the shotgun from where she had leaned it in the corner of the room. She checked for the umpteenth time that it was loaded, her fingertips circling the brass base of the shells that sealed the end of each barrel, before snapping it back together. The metallic click, its weight, the cold touch of the steel. It made her feel both stronger and scared at the same time.

The floorboards creaked under her feet as she walked to the back of the house.

In the kitchen the thump was louder. It was definitely coming from outside. From the barn.

Regan was in the barn.

She turned out the light, allowed a moment for her eyes to adjust.

You can do this Rose. She extended a hand to the doorframe to steady herself. Reached down. Turned the key. The lock cracked.

She opened the door.

With one clammy hand gripping the stock of the shotgun, Rose slid her finger over the smooth metal of the trigger and prepared to step into the night.

As soon as she unlatched the fly screen the wind pulled it from her hand, flinging back into the house with a bang.

Rose jumped. Flinched. Her finger involuntarily squeezed the trigger. A single round burst from the shotgun. The shot boomed once in her ear, the shockwaves ripped

through her head as her eardrums struggled to contain the sound. Five yards ahead a clump of dirt a foot square leapt into the air.

She leaned back into the doorframe, catching her breath. She could feel her heart trying to beat its way out of her chest. Sliding her finger off the trigger, she rested it on the outside of the guard.

Now he would know she was coming. But he would also know she was armed.

Taking a deep breath in an attempt to regain her composure, Rose descended the steps and began to move across the yard. She stepped past the shallow crater left by the shotgun blast. The lawn was cold and dry under her bare feet. The wind buffeted her, pushing her sideways, forcing her to point on an angle to go straight ahead.

With a wind gust the thump came again and now Rose could see it was the barn door, not properly closed, banging against the top of the framing. You could only bolt the barn door closed from the outside, not from within. *He must be in there.*

But what if he wasn't? She stopped dead and swung the gun around, letting it lead her as she pirouetted round. She knew he had been in the house, but was sure he wasn't there now. Maybe he had been in the barn, but had gone from there, leaving the door unlocked? He could be watching from the shadows of the trees and shrubs that bordered the yard. Or under the house, crouched between the tall pilings, following her footsteps above him, until he knew she was outside.

No, he was in the barn. She felt certain of it. Moving again more cautiously now. She glanced behind her. Her eyes flicked right then left.

A metre from the barn door, it bowed out again from the top before thumping back into position. She recoiled from the sound. Summoning her courage reached forward and grabbed the old wooden handle.

She balanced the shotgun up in one hand as best she could. It was an effort to keep the barrel pointed close to horizontal.

Rose wrenched the door open in one clean movement.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the barn's interior the shadows revealed the shape of a man standing in its centre. He stood as still as a statue.

He took a single step.

Reached his arms out towards her.

'Rose. It's me.'

He paused, waiting for her to speak.

Rose could hear her own breathing over the sound of the wind whistling past the barn.

'Don't shoot Rose.'

His voice cracked.

'They're going to kill me Rose. Please. Help me.'

Twenty-Six

William James drove. The thin man sat in an awkward driving position, his neck craned forward to the windscreen, shoulders barely touching the seat back. In contrast Frank Sheldon seemed to fill the passenger seat in its entirety, stuffed into it like the upholstery on a leather armchair. His raspy breathing the only sound as the men travelled in silence.

They hadn't spoken of Regan since the day Sheldon had despatched the accountant north to pay and placate Councillor Murdoch a little over a week ago. Both tasks were completed successfully and their Gold Coast project was back on track. He was pleased there was no irreparable damage as the result of Regan's betrayal. Now all Frank Sheldon needed to recover was a bag full of cash. And the respect lost when someone thinks they can fuck you and get away with it.

A light sleety rain began to fall as they drove through Kinds Cross. The roads were slick, reflecting the arc of streetlights, the neon of the strip bars and the red glow of the cars in front. The wheels of the Holden Brougham hissed on the wet tarmac. The sound of the Rolling Stones blaring out of one of the clubs. Down through Potts Point into Elizabeth Bay. The windows of houses and apartments flashed by, checkerboards of light. The homes of normal people going about their nightly business. Preparing dinner, helping the kids with their homework, watching television or listening to the radio. Sheldon rubbed his hands together, feeling a chill.

'You want me to turn the heater on Frank?'

Frank Sheldon shook his head and remained silently gazing out the window.

He received two phone calls from Elias earlier that day. One just after midday to say that the Irish kid Micky had spotted Regan outside his flat in Woolloomooloo. The next in the early evening to say they had him. He knew he should have been pleased. Instead he felt a knot in the base of his stomach. He couldn't prevent his mind returning to the dark days in West London, the violence that he thought he left behind.

The warehouse was tucked away at the end of a side road in Rushcutters Bay. The site was earmarked for redevelopment, but presently sat empty. Frank Sheldon had only visited there once, on the day he bought it. He recalled the dilapidated warehouse. Rotting timber, roof iron spotted with holes that let the rain in. Cold as a morgue.

They turned off the main road and passed under the overhead railway lines.

As the car slowed Frank Sheldon cracked the window to let in a little of the evening air. The low rumble of the Brougham's V8 engine echoed off the buildings of the narrow street. Panel beaters, engineering workshops and ships chandlers for the nearby marina. All closed. Their windows and doors sealed with steel mesh and roller doors to protect against the night.

Up ahead Frank Sheldon saw the heavy wooden door of the warehouse slide open, the squeaking complaint of its ancient pulleys. From the shadows he saw Elias emerge. The big Lebanese had an expression as sombre as Sheldon's mood. He felt a sense of gratitude because of it. Elias nodded to them, William James lifting one hand of the steering wheel in response. The door squeaked shut behind them.

A layer of water glazed the concrete floor. It rippled away from under the car's tyres they moved slowly through the murky interior of the warehouse. A glint of light reflected off a car parked at the far end of the store. William James swung the wheel it its direction. Their headlights illuminated Elias's Ford Prefect, the slouched figure of Micky standing beside it, smoking a cigarette. He pulled to the car a halt, cut the engine but left the headlights shining on to the back of the Prefect.

'Where is he?' Sheldon asked as he pulled his heavy frame out of the passenger seat, using the door frame to lever himself to his feet.

'We left him in car, boss' replied Elias who appeared out of the darkness behind him.

'Still in the boot'

'Let's see him then'

Elias turned and nodded at Micky who unlocked the boot.

Before it was fully open a leg shot out of the void and began kicking wildly into the air.

Micky began throwing punches at the writhing body inside. Elias strode quickly across to the car.

'Easy' said Elias to Micky then turned to lean into the boot. 'You stay still or get hurt. You stay quiet or get hurt. Understand?'

The thrashing figure in the boot grew still. Elias nodded his approval.

'We gonna lift you out now. Quiet. Still. Remember.'

The two men reached into the boot and lifted the figure out. Slowly the man unravelled, his feet struggling to find the pitch of the floor. After a moment he was able to take his own weight but was still held tightly by the men either side of him.

Sheldon lit a cigar. The tobacco crackled as he inhaled.

'Why is he wearing that?' he asked, pointing with the cigar. 'That's army.'

'He's fuckin well trying to fool us I reckon' Micky said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other like a boxer. 'I reckon he...'

Elias held up a hand to cut the younger man off. 'We dunno boss.'

'Who the fuck are you guys?'

The men started as if surprised to hear the voice of their captive.

Mickey swung a low hook that bent him over and left him gasping for air.

'He said keep fuckin quiet'

Sheldon held a hand up to silence the red head.

'Elias, why is his arm in a sling?'

'We dunno boss.'

He took a drag on the cigar and looked down at the figure before him.

'Boss?'

'Yes Elias what is it?'

'I don't think it's him boss.'

'What?'

'Regan. I don't think it's him.'

Sheldon squinted up at Elias. Mickey too was glaring at him and stepped angrily forward.

'Of course it's him. Look, he's...'

Frank Sheldon stepped towards Mickey and pointed a finger in his face, the tip of the cigar only inches from the boy's face.

'Why don't you speak. When you are spoken to.'

Mickey took a step back.

'Yes Mister Sheldon, sorry Mister Sheldon.'

He turned back to Elias.

'Why do you say he's not Regan?'

'I dunno boss. He different'

'How different'

'Dunno boss, different. Just different' Elias shrugged.

William James stepped out of the shadows.

'Well Elias if it's not Regan then who is it?'

Elias shrugged again. 'Regan say once he got brother. Live up country somewhere.'

'What a twin brother?'

'Dunno Mister James. He didn't say.'

The figure on the ground coughed and cleared his throat in an attempt to speak.

'Connor' he rasped. 'I'm Connor. Regan's brother.'

'Elias, stand him up.'

The Lebanese reached down and hauled Connor to his feet. Frank Sheldon moved closer and examined the man's features, as if they might provide some sort of answer.

'If you're not Regan then why are you driving his car, calling by his flat?'

'I've been away. Vietnam. The war' He grabbed at the breast pocket of his shirt, lifted it up to show the Coat of Arms. 'I got back today. Regan was supposed to pick me up at the airport. Take me home. But he wasn't there. Left the keys and a note. Said to use his car, stay at his place.'

Connor reached into his pocket and thrust a piece of paper out. Sheldon nodded and Elias snatched the paper from his hand. Took it to Sheldon who flicked open his cigarette lighter and read the note.

Frank Sheldon turned to William James and smiled. The accountant spread his hands wide and nodded.

'What did you say your name was?' Sheldon asked, turning back to him.

'Connor.'

'Connor' Sheldon repeated. 'Does he like you, your brother?'

Connor shrugged. 'I think so.' He looked down at his feet. 'I thought so'

Frank Sheldon took a drag on his cigar, and then let out a chuckle, cigar smoke coming out his mouth in three little clouds.

'Regan Thorn' he said to no one in particular. 'Regan Thorn you are full of surprises.'

Twenty-Seven

They let Connor sit in the car, the swarthy Middle-Eastern bloke plonking him down into the front seat.

'Stay' he said and held out an open palm, like he was training a dog.

Connor was thankful to rest his body for a moment after the strain of the disorientating ride in the boot and the punches he had taken. His shoulder ached and he could feel the tightness of his bruised stomach. He longed to get his hands on the painkillers that were still stuffed inside his duffle bag back in Regan's car.

Outside a conference of sorts was taking place. Connor could just make out three figures as he craned his neck to look back, squinting against the white blaze of the other car's headlights into the shadows of the warehouse. Three figures: one fat, one tall and muscular, the last thin and stooped. The red haired Irish kid had sloped off into the darkness of the warehouse. Regan could see where he was only by the glow of his cigarette.

Connor assumed the fat man was Frank Sheldon. It was he that held court now, his podgy arms waving around, his cigar tip making circles as it trailed his hand's movement. The conversation seemed to be two-way between Sheldon and the weaselly little man. The big bloke stood on one side, nodding in agreement but saying little.

Eventually they seemed to reach a decision and moments later the driver's door opened and the big man crammed himself into the car.

'My name Elias. We take you back now' he said simply.

'Just like that? You drop me home like nothing happened?'

Elias shrugged and reached a hand forward to turn the ignition on. On the second attempt the car hummed into life.

He could see the big Holden reversing up, then turning towards the warehouse's doors which were being pulled open. The Prefect fell in behind the larger car and followed it in convoy.

Outside the yellow glow of streetlights was a contrast to the gloom of the warehouse's interior. Connor felt a little tension drop from his shoulders, a prisoner released, back in the free world once more. The warehouse doors squeaked closed behind them. The rattle of a chain being pulled through and secured. The Holden drove away.

His door was pulled open. Without realising he had rested his weight on it and he almost fell out into the street.

'Get in the back' said the redhead and grabbed him by the collar.

'No. Mickey you get in back' said Elias and reached over Connor, pulling him back upright in the seat and slamming the door in one smooth movement. Connor peered out the window and saw the Irishman clenching his fists, his jaw tight. Elias revved the car slightly and pushed the gear into first, leaving Mickey with no option but to get into the back seat behind Connor. He slammed the door hard.

They drove for the first few minutes in silence before Elias spoke.

'So. Connor. You seen a yellow bag anywhere?'

'A yellow bag? No, why? What's in it?'

'Ah, doesn't matter.'

Connor turned to look at Elias, the big man forcing a smile in response.

'So when you last see Regan?'

'Before I left for Vietnam. In May. Our grandmother's funeral.'

'Ah yes. I remember. She die' Elias said, pleased to make the recollection. He then caught himself and dropped the smile. 'Very sad. Grandmother is good woman' he added, shaking his head solemnly.

'Yes. Good woman.'

Elias continued to drive on in silence. Connor could see his hands nervously clenching then releasing the steering wheel.

'So, your brother hey? Regan.'

'Yes. My brother. Regan.'

'You know where he might go? We wanna talk with him. Only talk. You know'

Yeah, I know. Just like you talk with me. 'No. Sorry. I've no idea where he's gone'

'Friend? Family?'

'No family. We're orphans, see. Don't know any of his friends.'

'What about you home town? Is call Broken River, right? He go up there?'

Connor snorted. 'What? No way. Regan doesn't have anyone there now. Hates the place.'

They pulled up at a set of traffic lights. Elias turned to look at Connor.

'But where he go then?'

'Well Elias, I reckon if he's got a bag of your boss's money he could have gone anywhere. Far far away I reckon'

The big man's face creased into a frown. 'Now you look. We gonna find him. And once we find him...' he tapered off.

'You gonna talk with him' Connor smiled.

'Yeah. We gonna talk with him.'

A car horn sounded behind them. The traffic light was green. Elias turned back to the road and the car lurched forward.

'Yeah' said Connor. 'I wanna talk with him too.'

Upstairs in Regan's flat Connor kept the light off. He pulled the venetian blinds shut then lifted one of the slats and peered out. The street appeared deserted.

He twisted through his fingers the card that Elias had pressed into his palm when they coasted to a halt outside. It was handed to him along with the instruction to call if he was contacted by Regan, and most surprisingly an apology. 'For the inconvenience' as Elias put it. They made a show of driving off down the road, turning left at the bottom and accelerating away up the hill towards the city. But Connor suspected they hadn't gone far. They would be waiting. Watching. Hoping he would lead them to Regan.

He tipped the contents of his army issue bag out onto the bed. A rattle gave away the location of the vial of painkillers prescribed back in Saigon. He flipped the lid and dropped a couple of the small white pills onto his tongue. They began to dissolve immediately, filling his mouth with a chemical tang. In the half light of the small room he began to look for some water. His eyes set upon a bottle on the bench of the small kitchenette that ran along one side of the sitting room. He picked it up. Whiskey. Twisting the lid with one hand he ran his forearm down the neck of the bottle. The lid wound up and off and rolled into the sink with a tinny clang. Connor lifted the bottle to his lips and took a swig, the liquid picking the painkillers off his tongue and sending them down his throat, replacing their caustic fizz with the hot fumes of cheap spirit.

He gave out a spluttering cough. But the burn of the whiskey in his throat seemed to draw the heat out of his shoulder and he took another swig, this one longer, and felt the burn run all the way down to his stomach.

He walked through to Regan's bedroom, at the rear of the flat, flipping on the light. He began to throw clothes out of the wardrobe, onto the bed and the floor. Nylon pants. Wide-collared shirts with garish patterns. Finally he managed to find a pair of jeans

and a plain black t-shirt. They fit him well. The jeans were even a little loose. He liberated a belt from some white trousers and tightened it around his waist.

Back in the lounge he swallowed two more pills, washed down with whiskey. He picked up the keys for Regan's car and made for the door. Once out in the corridor he paused, then, as an afterthought returned back inside to pick up the whiskey bottle and his painkillers.

Outside a light drizzle continued to fall. The misting rain cooled Connor's face and suddenly he felt intoxicated. The shoulder that had been throbbing with pain earlier was now blissfully numb.

The Kingswood was pointed downhill, and with as much leverage as he could muster with his good arm Connor dragged the steering wheel around and managed to clear the car parked in front. He coasted down the street with the engine and headlights off. At the base of the hill he reached across, pushed the gear stick into second and dropped the clutch. The engine roared into life and he accelerated away towards the expressway.

It was nearing midnight and the streets were close to deserted. It took only forty minutes to reach the outskirts of the city, when he was able to accelerate up to sixty. He checked his rear vision mirror constantly. There were few cars on the road, but the rain smeared back window made it difficult to distinguish one set of headlights from another. On the open road he varied his speed, dropping back to forty then accelerating rapidly back to the speed limit. North of Gosford he became convinced

that the Ford Prefect was tailing him, but then once he left Newcastle the road behind him fell dark and had to believe it was only paranoia at work, or he'd lost them.

He continued to sip whiskey along the way. He also took a couple more painkillers. As the clock ticked past midnight he began to feel tired and woozy. He decided he would take no more of the little white pills, even if the pain in his shoulder began to flare again. He wanted to see Rose and Lucinda with a clear head. Despite feeling and looking worse for wear he was eager to make a good impression upon his return home. It had been six months since he had last seen them, and he felt as nervous as a schoolboy on a first date. In those six months Lucinda was talking and walking. He wondered how, if at all, Rose had changed.

When he had stood on the beach in Sydney six months ago and told his brother he would go to Vietnam for him, he thought it would be a great adventure. Boys own stuff. He wouldn't have admitted it to himself then, but he had been jealous of the excitement of his brother's life in Sydney. How boring was Connor's world by comparison? The mill, scratching by on minimum wage, a crying baby to come home to. How foolish he had been. Regan's life in Sydney was a sham, doing crooked work for small-time thugs and criminals. And as for Vietnam... *You're a fuckin idiot Connor Thorn. A fucking idiot.* He punched the ball of his hand against the dashboard.

He took another sip of whiskey. Wound the window up a little against the cold. Pressed the accelerator. He would be in Broken River before dawn.

Twenty-Eight

Regan twisted the taps to open. The showerhead emitted little more than a trickle as the old pipes groaned into life. Slowly the flow increased but the water remained cold to the touch.

As he waited he peered into a cloudy shaving mirror affixed to the wall above the sink. He hardly recognised the face of the man who looked back. A layer of grime covered his skin, a week's worth of dirt from dusty roads and sleeping rough. He'd stayed one night in a church as he'd hitched his way north. That was as good as it got. The next night a country bus shelter. Then for the last four days he'd hidden out in the hay loft of the barn. Previously he'd never let his beard go unshaved for more than a day. He was surprised to see it now, its growth uneven, mottled clumps of hair sprinkled with ginger. Combined with the dark rings that underlined his bloodshot eyes, Regan reckoned he looked more like forty than twenty-one.

Steam finally started rising from the shower. He stepped unsteadily into the bath-tub, feeling woozy with exhaustion. His feet searched for grip on the rust blistered bottom and he reached his hands out to the wall to steady himself. His head fell forward and he groaned, savouring the sensation of hot water striking the back of his neck. It plumed up over his skull, around his ears and fell cascading around his face like a veil.

He'd just about shit himself when he heard the shotgun blast. Half asleep to wide awake and scrambling down the rickety ladder in a couple of seconds. Looking for escape like an animal trapped. Knowing there was only one way in or out. As the door

swung open the silhouette, not of Elias and Mickey, but of Rose. His relief temporary as he saw her struggling to bring the shotgun to vertical and point it straight at him. All the fear and paranoia of days on the run welled up, but he forced himself to speak, his voice crackling, begging her to help him. He felt a flush of embarrassment at how he had pleaded, how miserable he was. Hot tears came coursing down his face. After he wiped them away with his sleeve he saw she had lowered the gun.

He reached down for the soap and a cloth and began scrubbing away at his face, his neck, his arms and legs. Rubbing away the fear. A man on the run, living like an animal, becomes human once more.

When the water began to run tepid he stepped out from under it and turned off the taps. The room was dense with steam. He dried himself with the towel she had given him. Fished around the vanity for a razor, lathered his face with soap and cleared a patch of the mirror with his fingers. The razor was blunt and tore at his skin but the sting of pain felt strangely good, made him feel alive.

When he opened the door, wrapping himself in the towel, he saw a pile of clothes laid out in front of the door. Connor's things. A bush shirt, an old pair of footy shorts, some thick woollen socks.

After he dressed he looked at himself in the mirror again. *Welcome back*. He forced a smile. But there was still something about himself that was different, missing. As if he had shrunk back into his skin, a thinner, paler version of himself.

He stood staring into the mirror for a moment longer.

Porridge bubbled away in a pot on the stove. Rose did have other supplies, better food than plain oats she could give him. But she was buggered if she was going to roll out the red carpet for him. *He's bloody lucky he didn't cop a blast from the shotgun.* She had a mind to leave him out there in the barn, lock the door until morning. But there was something so pathetic about him. The way he had pleaded with her, a broken man. On her side feelings of compassion, a mother's instinct to nurture. Then as he told her men were trying to kill her, a different emotion swept over her. Guilt.

She heard a floorboard creak behind her and turned. Regan emerged from the hallway, wearing Connor's old clothes. She glanced across to the pantry, glimpsing the stock of shotgun, stacked next to the mop and broom, concealed by the sweep of a hanging apron.

When he spoke he sounded different. She noticed it again. A lighter tone. Hollow.

'Thanks for the shower. I used a razor too. I hope you don't mind'

Rose shrugged, her face stony.

'I can't tell you how good it feels to wash' Regan went on. 'To be clean and warm and in fresh clothes. I felt like a wild animal.'

'What were you doing hiding in my barn?'

Regan looked away. He reached out a hand, gestured at the chair. 'May I sit?' he asked.

Rose hesitated for a moment then nodded. 'I'm making you something to eat'

He pulled a chair out from the table and lowered himself into it.

'Thanks Rose. I don't know how to thank you'

'It's only porridge'

'Not just for the porridge. I mean for... for everything'

'So. What were you doing in my barn?'

'I'm in trouble Rose. I fucked up. A right royal fuck up.'

He slumped forward, elbows on the table, dropping his head into his hands. With his palms he rubbed his eye sockets, and she could hear him sigh. She turned the stove off and spooned oats into a bowl, dusting the top with brown sugar. She crossed the room and placed the bowl and a spoon in front of him then sat down opposite.

He lifted his head out of his hands and stared into the steaming porridge.

'You know I told you I had these meetings. Up north. In the Gold Coast.'

'The property deal you were doing. Negotiations with the Council.'

Regan gave a derisive snort. 'Yeah, that's me. The big shot.' He shook his head. 'It's all bullshit Rose. I wasn't doing deals. I was delivering money. That's all. Bribes to speed the development through Council'

He looked up to the ceiling, his face red with embarrassment.

'I'm a bagman Rose. That's all. A delivery boy. And I couldn't even do that without fucking it up'

Rose looked away, not wanting to share his shame.

'And you don't know where the money's gone?' she asked softly.

Regan shook his head. 'I'm such an idiot Rose. That night I left here I was so drunk and all over the shot. I left the bag sitting on the back seat, the car unlocked, right in the middle of Surfers.' He gave a wry laugh. 'Some street urchin hit the jackpot that night.'

Rose crossed her arms around herself.

'Yeah you were pretty tanked alright'

'Aw shit Rose, and I haven't even apologised.' He looked at her through tired eyes. 'I was out of control that night Rose and I'm sorry. I just... I got real drunk and... Just being here with you. And the baby. It does something to my head I can't explain. I just... wanted you so badly.' He reached a hand across the table towards her. 'I still want you.'

Rose stood and walked away from the table. She picked up a spoon and began scrubbing oats cooked on to the bottom of the pot. Regan leaned back in the chair and looked up at the ceiling again.

'Shit I'd kill for a smoke.'

Rose dried her hands and put her head into the panty then tossed a cigarette packet on the table in front of him.

'You left them here last time.'

Regan smiled like he'd won the lottery. 'You bloody beauty. You're a life saver in more ways than one Rose, I can tell you'

She placed an old saucer at his elbow to use as an ashtray but didn't retreat back to the sink.

'You say you want me. But you've never been there for me. I was seventeen Regan. Seventeen and pregnant. And you were gone.'

'I got expelled Rose, there was nothing I could have done.'

'What, apart from not being a dickhead and getting expelled in the first place? Apart from not scurrying off to Sydney and leaving me here? You question why I stuck with Connor, why I still stick with him. It's because he was there for me. He didn't run away.'

Regan emitted a snort that tapered off as forced laughter.

'Is that right Rose? Good old Connor. Honest as the day's long. Connor who would never run off and leave you. Right?'

'Yes,' she said softly. 'That's right.'

'No Rose. Its bullshit'

She shook her head silently.

'Well where the hell is he now Rose? Is he here looking after his family? Or off fighting the Americans' war in Vietnam?'

'That's different. He had no choice. He got conscripted.'

'No Rose. I'm trying to tell you that's bullshit. He *chose* to go' Regan smiled, a madman's smile. 'It was *me* that got conscripted. And quick as a flash he stepped up and offered to go in my place. Couldn't wait to volunteer'

'I don't believe you' she said softly, shaking her head.

'Why do you think you never get any letters from the army?'

Regan reached into his pocket, then realising he was wearing his brother's clothes stood and stepped out of the room. When he returned he dropped a handful of crumpled papers onto the table.

'Look. Letters from the army, sent to my address. You ever wonder why his wages got paid straight into your bank account instead of receiving cheques in the mail? I got them Rose, banked them every week, just like Connor asked me to. Here, take a look'

He picked up the pack of cigarettes, stood back from the table and gestured towards the pile of dirty envelopes, a look of triumphant glee on his face. Fishing inside the pack he pulled out a lighter and lit up, taking a deep drag.

Rose stepped tentatively towards the table and picked up one of the envelopes, straightening it out with her hands. She read the address, looked inside and removed a payslip, then returned it to the envelope and placed it back on the table. Slowly she looked at every one of the envelopes and their contents then placed them in a neat pile.

Regan watched her, finishing one cigarette, stubbing it out in the saucer then lighting another.

When she tried to speak her voice crackled. She coughed and started again.

'Why Regan? Why would he go away to Vietnam instead of staying here?'

Regan shrugged. 'You'd have to ask him that Rose. Told me he wanted to get away. From Broken River. From the mill. Said his mates were all off doing stuff and he was stuck here with a wife and a screamin...' he stopped, shrugged. 'Sorry.'

Rose shook her head slowly. 'I'm going out' she said, her voice a monotone. 'For a walk.'

'Are you serious? What is it, like three in the morning?'

'Doesn't matter' she said then pointed to the hallway. 'Sleep if you want. You know where everything is. Lucinda won't wake for another couple of hours at least'

'Ok, sure. Thanks Rose. And sorry for all this. I thought it was best you knew the truth.'

'Yeah,' she said absently, 'the truth.' She looked up and turned to face him, her eyes heavy with sadness. 'Would you square things away with your boss if you found that money?'

'Yeah of course. But that's not going to happen, is it?'

She smiled weakly. 'No, I guess not. Enjoy your sleep. I'll see you in a bit.'

The sound of the screen door flapping closed rang in Regan ears for a moment before the house drew silent.

He took one last drag on his cigarette before stubbing it out. The bowl of porridge was untouched. It looked cold, grey and uninviting. He probably should have some, he hadn't eaten much in the last few days, but then a wave of tiredness swept over him and he could think of nothing but sleep.

He walked into the hallway, opening the hall cupboard to remove a blanket and a pillow. Before continuing to the front room he stopped by the phone, and reached under it, feeling the loose wires he had carefully removed on his first day of hiding in the barn, sneaking into the house when Rose and Lucinda were out.

Beside the armchair sat a book and an empty tea cup, just the same as when he had peered in the window on his first visit here. He sat in the armchair, twisting to his side and curling his knees up beside him. He pushed the cushion between his ear and the head of the armchair and draped the blanket across himself.

He closed his eyes and felt the weight of exhaustion creeping slowly through his body.

As he drifted into sleep the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile.

The moon had come out, sitting low in the sky to the north.

As Rose neared the estuary she could see a red glow between the top of the sand dunes and the night sky. It was not yet four in the morning but at this time of year the days were becoming longer and the sun was in the sky by five. Despite its warming

appearance the night air remained cold. Rose realised she had gone out wearing only a t-shirt and jeans and wrapped her arms around herself.

Regan's revelation that Connor had chosen, not been conscripted to go to Vietnam had winded her like a blow to the stomach, sucking the air out of her. She felt faint standing in the kitchen and having now escaped into the cool night air began to feel as if she could breathe again.

For the six months that he had been away Connor had grown larger for her. She had been so angry at first when he returned from Sydney to tell her he had been drafted. Her thoughts only for herself and Lucinda, asking herself *how could he leave them like that?*

But slowly she had come to accept that he had no choice, that leaving was harder for him than it was for her to stay. Then they spent a week holidaying on the beach and she had felt closer to him than ever before. Which made his leaving all the harder. When he was gone the hole he had left in her and Lucinda's life was gaping, it seemed so big it could never filled. Maybe that was why she had let Regan into her house, into her life. He reminded her of Connor.

And Regan was, if nothing else, company. And he seemed to enjoy being with her too. When he displayed his true colours she had been so angry with herself, had vowed never to let him in her door again. And now, here she was, with Regan sleeping in the front room and her husband half way around the world, crawling through a jungle.

She arrived at the edge of the estuary. The tide was full, and the moon reflected off the corrugations of the water as it lapped gently against the shoreline.

She paced up and down the water's edge, clenching and releasing her fists. She kicked out at the sand sending plumes of it into the air in front of her before settling back to earth, grain by grain. The act felt futile. When she came upon a length of knotted driftwood she picked it up with both hands and swung it into the ground where it broke in half with a satisfying crack.

The noise sounded good and she matched it with her own voice, screaming into the night sky. She stood, head back, the muscles in her neck straining taunt, yelling for all she was worth.

When finally she stopped her throat was burnt raw and her eyes wet with the strain. She folded forward, clutching her knees and began to sob, so deeply that she struggled to regain her breath in the midst of it.

I want them out of my life. Both of them.

Gradually the sobbing subsided and she pulled herself upright. A calm clarity fell over her and she turned and walked deliberately back to the Morton Bay Fig that straddled the high tide mark, the tree that had cradled Lucinda so many times as Rose waded into the estuary.

She reached out and touched the bark of the tree's trunk. It was smooth, as if it had been buffed and oiled by a thousand hands, rather than standing alone on an isolated stretch of coast, far from any human's touch apart from that of Rose. She knew this tree well.

She placed one foot, then another up onto the ridgeline of its exposed roots. They sat a foot above the ground and got her high enough to encircle both hands around one of the tree's lower branches and pull herself off the ground. She wrapped herself around it like a monkey then shimmied up it before twisting around so that with a moment's grunting effort she could kneel on top of it.

Turning and heading back along to the bough, Rose clambered up a succession of branches that formed steps until finally she found herself on top of the trunk. Here, as the tree's branches splayed out in all directions and a natural hollow had formed. Large enough for her to stand in and be concealed. Or the perfect place to hide something.

She paused for a moment to catch her breath. From here she could see all the way across the estuary and the dunes to the long lines of white crested breakers stretching right to left as far as the eye could see. Beyond them the red glow of dawn, the sun sitting just below the horizon. And in the other direction the dull outline of the cottage, at the end of the long line of gum trees that led to it. The kitchen light a beacon. Further in the distance the undulations of the hills that had begun to catch the morning light, and beyond to the outline of mountain peaks against the sky.

Rose leaned over and reached into the hollow in the tree's trunk. Her fingers touched upon fabric when a flash of light caught her eye. Straightening up she looked back towards the cottage.

A ray of light flickered over the paddock. And then, emerging from behind the shadow of the cottage was its source. The unmistakable strobe of a car's headlights approaching.

Rose quickly scrabbled down and without pausing to look for her sandals began running barefoot back towards the house.

Twenty-Nine

The road blurred in and out of focus. Connor's eyelids felt like they were lined with lead, and he could feel the weight of tiredness through his shoulders and back. The whiskey was long gone, the empty bottle rolled around in the passenger's foot-well. The painkillers were gone too. Despite his best intentions Connor had continued to gulp them down throughout the long journey and taken the last of them a few minutes earlier.

As he passed through the deserted streets of Broken River he perked up a little. He was home now. Everything looked just the same. It felt like he had been gone longer, but the same old Broken River shop fronts staring back reminded him that it had only been six months. Pascoe Electical. Solly's Newsagent and Tobacconist. Right Price Grocery. He gave a chuckle. *Could have been gone six years it would still be the same.* Past his old school. Past the house where Rose used to live with her mother.

Five miles out of town he spotted the familiar shape of the bent old letterbox poking out into the road. In the half-light he could make out its tin flag hanging limply below. He swung the wheel, the tyres briefly skidding out on the gravel before the car rattled across the cattle stop. He accelerated down the drive. *Half a mile and I'm home*, the thought bringing a smile to his lips.

As he pulled round to the back of the cottage and brought the car to a halt he was surprised to see the kitchen light on. *Maybe she had gone to bed and left it on* he wondered, *or was she up early with the baby?*

Getting out he staggered, his legs wobbly beneath him. He leant back on the car, gripping the window frame to steady himself. He waited until he felt the blood return to his legs and head.

Walking again he blinked to try and bring the some form to the wavy rectangle of light that shone out of the kitchen door. It was not one but three, the shapes twisted and cut across each other. He tripped on the bottom step, only just getting his one good arm out in front of him to stop himself falling over. He felt better lower down and decided to climb up the steps. Like a three-legged dog.

Reaching the top step he stood, the light-headedness returning. The screen door needed to open outwards and he almost tottered over backwards as he swung it open. Then he was inside.

The place smelt of something stewed. And smoke. Connor went to the sink and poured himself a glass of water that he gulped down, then another. He was onto his third glass when he heard graunch of the screen door opening behind him.

'Connor. What are you doing here?'

He turned and saw a blurry outline of Rose in the doorway, breathing hard like she'd been running.

'Is that any way to welcome a man back to his own home?'

"What's wrong with you? Are you drunk? Stoned?'

He attempted to smile but it sat crooked on his face. He felt lopsided.

"Nah nah, all good. It's just these meds they got me on. For my shoulder, see?"

'I didn't know you were coming'

'That would be because my good...' he hiccupped, wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

'Because my good-for-nothing brother who was supposed to tell you I was coming home decided not to. Instead he decided to fuck me over.' He attempted a smile. 'But that's another story. I'm home now Rose. I'm home.'

He took an unsteady step towards her but stopped when she spoke.

'That's pretty ungrateful of Regan. Given you volunteered to go off to Vietnam in his place.'

'What the...' he stammered. 'Who told you that?'

'You're not going to try and deny it are you?'

Connor looked down at his feet. Without the kitchen bench to support him he was unsteady. When finally he lifted his head up it was not to look at Rose, rather to stare at the table. The untouched bowl of porridge. A saucer with the ash and butts of two cigarettes.

'He's here isn't he.' It was a statement not a question and came from deep in his chest, a low growl.

He stared across at Rose, his eyes black with rage.

'Where?' he asked.

Rose said nothing but he caught her glance in the direction of the hallway. He began walking with heavy deliberate steps across the room.

Once he reached the doorway she darted behind him into the pantry. After a moment spent untangling it from the apron she had draped around it, Rose emerged with the shotgun.

'Connor. Stop.' she shouted, but he appeared not to hear her and he banged his way down the hallway, bouncing heavily off one wall across to the other.

She raised the barrel of the gun to shoulder height and trained it on his back. She could feel the smooth metal of the trigger beneath her index finger.

'Stop. Connor. I want you to stop. I want you to go.' she shouted, tears starting to stream down her face. 'I want both of you to go'

Then, from the bedroom came the sound of Lucinda. The unmistakable gurgle, followed by the first of her awakening cries.

Connor heard it too and turned, entranced by the sound.

He began to smile but it faded from his face as he registered the shotgun that Rose held levelled at him, her arms trembling.

His eyes narrowed as if he had become sober.

'I want you to go Connor. I want you to go. Get out of this house'

'Give me that gun' he stepped forward and with surprising agility used his one good arm to push the barrel of the gun to one side. Rose took her hand away from around

the trigger guard and reached out to try and regain control of the barrel but Connor was too quick. With a firm grip on the end of the gun he ripped it free of her hands. Without turned it around, he reversed his direction of his movement, jabbing the stock back at her in a series of rapid movements. It connected twice. First with her face, the metallic tang of blood filling her mouth. Then, as she cowered away, Connor's second thrust hit the side of her temple with a dull thud.

She felt her legs go from underneath her and for a moment could see the twisting, flickering shape of the ceiling before she slumped on the floor and her vision cut to black.

Regan had fallen into an exhausted asleep soon after curling himself up in the old armchair. He didn't notice when the room was lit up with the beam of approaching headlights. The sound of his own car came to him as if it was in his dreams. Only the sound of raised voices reached through his semi-consciousness state, and even then it took a moment before he realised the voices were not in his head. That he was not dreaming.

He sat bolt upright in the chair, his eyes wide, his nose pointed like an animal sniffing the air.

He recognised the voices, first Rose yelling for someone to stop. Then his brother.

He jumped up out of the chair and made for the door. His fingers had touched the handle when he heard four words that stopped him dead in his tracks.

'Give me that gun'

The fear of earlier returned, its familiar adrenalin making his actions fast and deliberate. He turned and ran to the front door, grabbing the handle to wrench to open before remembering it was nailed shut. He stepped across to the window and tried to lift it open. Realising it was locked he reached up and began fumbling at the catch. Behind him the voices had grown silent. He could hear Lucinda crying.

Finally he managed to twist the catch open and with one lunging effort dragged the window open, the pulleys of the sash emitting a shrill squeak.

He had one leg up and over the window frame when behind him the door crashed open. He turned to see his brother Connor, eyes wild with anger, step into the room.

Regan dragged his other leg through the open window and half stepped, half fell onto the front porch. As he righted himself the boom of a shot rang out behind him and glass and splinters of wood showered down onto him.

Instinctively throwing his arms around his head he sprang off the deck and began running.

Once across the yard he plunged into the sugarcane. The plants though only half mature still grew higher than his head. The sharp edges of the leaves tore at his clothing and cut his legs and arms, but at least he was not a sitting target for Connor's next shotgun blast.

After a few minutes of fighting his way through the plantation Regan stopped. He listened for any noise but could hear only his own breathing. Cautiously he headed

back towards the line of gum trees that marked the edge of the cane. The sun was just visible over the top of the dunes and it bathed the open paddocks in a low light. He stopped, observed, but could see no movement. Steely shadows ran long from the gum trees, creating a dark passage that ran all along the side of the sugarcane. Regan reckoned that if he could get to the estuary and make it over to the dunes on the other side he could walk all the way along the beach to the settlement at Smith's Point.

Checking behind him again for any movement he began skulking slowly away.

Connor started to climb out the window after his brother but then decided to let him go. He was in no state to be chasing people out into the night. As he returned down the hallway he was surprised to see Rose. Then he remembered the struggle for the gun. He leaned over her.

'Rose. Rose. Wake up' Using the shotgun like a walking stick he lowered himself and reached to lift her head. There was blood on her lips. Rose mumbled incoherently. Conner gave her cheek a short slap and she flinched then opened her eyes. She looked up at him.

'Now you listen here Rose' he slurred. 'I don't know what the fuck Regan is doing here, but I'm not fucking happy about it. And whatever he's told you it doesn't matter. I'm home now. You're my wife. And Lucinda is my daughter.'

At this Rose let out a strangled laugh. She looked up at Connor and smiled, her lips stained red.

'Ha. Not yours. Regan's' she said and began to laugh. It brought on a bout of coughing and she spat a globule of red onto the floor. 'You understand me Connor?' she screamed. 'You're not the father, he is. So you can leave. Just go. Back to Vietnam or Sydney or wherever I don't care. And you can take your fucking brother with you'

Connor staggered back as if hit. He looked down at Rose, at the crazy smile on her blood-stained face. Then, dragging the shotgun behind him he walked past her through the kitchen and out into the dawn.

The cool morning air filled his lungs and made him feel like he was sobering up a little. The painkillers were wearing off and he could feel the dull throb in his shoulder return.

Looking down the driveway he wondered if Regan had headed out to the road. He reached into the pocket of his jeans and felt the cool metal of the keys. No, with Connor able to pursue him in the car he wouldn't have chosen that. He turned and squinted into the rising sun. He could hear the faint hiss of waves crashing in the distance. Somehow he knew that his brother had gone this way.

Slinging the gun over his shoulder Connor began striding towards the estuary.

Thirty

Elias and Mickey made most of the trip in silence. They argued briefly when they reached Grafton and the fuel gauge hit empty.

'I told you we should fill up in Sydney' said Elias.

'How the fuck was I supposed to know this Broken River place was so fuckin far away?' responded Mickey angrily. 'I thought half a tank would be plenty'

'Make no difference. We get to his home town, ask around. We find him'

'The way he's fuckin driving we can probably catch him.'

They pulled off the highway to fill up at a 24-hour Truck Stop and watched as the Kingswood they'd been carefully tailing for the last six hours weave away into the distance.

Elias would have to admit Mickey had done a good job at driving. As they left the urban areas of Sydney then Newcastle behind, the young Irishman had driven long stretches of highway with the headlights off, using only the moonlight and the red taillights of the Holden in front to guide them.

With a full tank of fuel and a much needed bathroom stop they hit the road again. Elias took a turn at the wheel.

The sun was beginning to rise as they reached Broken River. They drove twice up the main street looking for any sign of a life when they spotted an elderly man walking a dog. Elias pulled the car in beside him. Mickey leaned out the window.

'G'day mate. Can you tell me where I'd find the house of Connor Thorn?'

The man eyed him suspiciously. 'Depends who's asking'

'Mick's my name. I'm an old school mate.'

The old man squinted to get a better look. 'Well Mick, I know most of the kids who went to school here. And I don't remember you.'

Mickey turned back inside the car and whispered something under his breath to Elias who murmured back. 'No, just talk'.

He popped his head back out of the window.

'Not High School. School in the army. Army training school. We both got called up at the same time. I heard he was back home and wanted to say g'day'

'Well I hadn't heard he's back, but if you were in the army together I guess that's ok.'

The old man pointed north. 'Follow this road out of town about 5 miles. You'll cross a one lane bridge; it's the next driveway on the right after that. If you reach the river you've gone too far.'

'Thanks mate' Mickey said. Elias put the car in gear and drove off.

When Connor reached the shoreline he could see the outline of Regan, wading through the water towards the dunes. The tide was in, and he saw that his brother had taken a route that took him through deep water. It was already up to the mid-point of Regan's chest.

Connor lifted the stock of the shotgun to his good shoulder. Releasing his left arm from the sling he strained to lift and aim the barrel, gritting his teeth and letting out a low, determined groan.

He took aim at the upper body of his brother, bobbing as he waded through the deep water.

Then, carefully, he squeezed the trigger.

The trigger clicked but nothing happened.

He lowered the barrel, sighing with relief as the weight of it released from his injured arm. With his good hand he clipped open the mechanism. To his surprise both of the cartridges were used, even though Connor was sure he had only fired one.

He briefly considered returning to the cottage to search for more ammunition but realised that his brother would be miles away by the time he got back.

Dropping the gun in the shallows he began walking out into the estuary.

He headed on a different bearing to that of Regan. There would be one deeper section to cross, where the channel narrowed as it approached the junction with the river. But the rest of the time he would be wading through water that was only knee deep.

He was certain he could catch his brother before he reached the dunes.

Ten minutes after leaving Broken River they arrived at the cottage, pulling up behind the gold Kingswood. Elias began to walk towards the cottage when Mickey yelled for him to stop.

'Gimme the car keys. Need to get something out the boot'

Elias turned and tossed the keys. Mickey popped open the boot and after a moment scratching around the spare tyre he emerged with something shiny and black in his hand.

'What the fuck is that?'

Mickey held up the revolver. 'Colt 38'

'Why you got that?'

'We're in the country now Elias, all these fuckers got guns'

Elias shook his head and was about to speak when the back door of the cottage swung open. A young woman, dishevelled. Blood caked her mouth like a child's attempt at makeup.

She cradled a child in her arms. One side of her shirt was lifted up so the child could feed from her breast.

'Who the hell are you guys?' she said.

'Elias. This Mickey. We come for Regan. You know where Regan is?'

The girl nodded and pointed in the direction of the water.

Mickey leaned into Elias, whispering in his ear.

'Yeah, you right' Elias said, then turned back to her.

'You live here?'

She nodded.

'You come with us, ok? You show us where Regan is. We not hurt you'

Rose nodded and began walking away towards the estuary, the child still clamped to her breast.

Mickey and Elias followed.

Regan was standing on the shoreline at the far side of the estuary getting his bearings when he heard splashing from over his left shoulder. He turned to see Connor, striding through the shallows towards him.

Regan looked towards the dunes, considering his escape across them to the beach. But instead he turned and began walking towards his brother.

They had fought as children and as teenagers many times. The houses they grew up in were often filled with the sounds of violent confrontation, and the boys had learned to settle their own differences similarly. The punches were normally preceded with an

argument, a push or a shove, a curse or an insult. But today there would be no such preamble.

Regan struck first, leaning in to throw a reaching hook into Connor's face. It glanced off the side of his head, knuckles catching at the soft folds of the ear. The blow sparked Connor into life. Realising that with one good arm a boxing duel was not one he was likely to win he dropped into a low crouch and sprung forward, driving his shoulder into Regan's mid-drift, and taking him down in a rugby tackle.

They thrashed around in the knee deep water, wrestling each other.

It became impossible to separate their forms.

Hands grappled to gain a handful of skin, clothes, hair, anything that could be used to pull one man down and the other up. Toes and fingers scrambled to find grip in the silt of the estuary floor and push to upright. Punches seemed ineffectual at such close range. One man lost his balance, falling over backwards, and the other sprang on top, hands and fingers striving to find a grip on the face and neck. Fingers closed around the windpipe, knees pushing down on shoulders. One man using all his weight to keep the other man down, to keep his head below the waterline.

Movements became frantic with desperation.

Underwater for seconds. Then a minute. Then two.

The struggle was over.

A body floated to the top of the water.

The tidal current lifted it up and took it slowly away.

Towards the river mouth and the sea beyond it.

They reached the top of the bank above estuary. The sun was now full in the eastern sky and Rose squinted into it, shading her eyes with one hand, cradling Lucinda in the other.

'Where is Regan?' the big dark man asked her.

She said nothing and continued to scan the estuary for any sign of movement.

'There' she said finally and pointed into the sun.

The two men either side of her peered into the sunlight where the outline of a man could be seen staggering through the water towards them.

'Come' he beckoned to his redheaded companion and Rose. The three of them walked down to the shoreline.

The figure was now only thirty yards away. Rose strained to make out the man's features but the brightness of the sun directly behind him made it impossible. When he was ten yards away the man stopped and for the first time seemed to notice the three people that were waiting for him at the water's edge.

'Is that him?' Rose was asked. 'Is that Regan?'

She looked at the man again. But with the sun behind she could not tell who it was.

Connor or Regan.

Then, as he shifted his weight from one leg to the other his head moved across the sun, blocking it out.

A magnifying glass burning through paper.

The sun was almost blocked completely. She would be able to make out the man's face.

Don't look at the eclipse.

She gazed down at Lucinda who smiled up at her. She smiled back. Without looking up she spoke.

'Yes. That's him' she said simply then turned to walk away.

The big swarthy man released her arm and let her go.

Elias stepped forward but it was Mickey that spoke first.

'Where's the fuckin money Regan?'

The figure that stood in the shadows took a step back and seemed to trip on something. He looked down to see what it was, then leaned over to pick it up.

Elias could see the unmistakable outline of a shotgun.

When the boom came, it was not from that direction, but beside him.

Elias brought his arms up instinctively, covering his head.

When he opened his eyes again he saw Mickey, arm extended, his revolver smoking in his hand.

The Irishman looked across to him.

'Told you these country fucks have guns'

Summer

Thirty-One

'Connor? Rose?'

Steve slammed the door of the ute and walked towards the rear of the house.

The yard was overgrown, with grass growing up to his knees. The wooden door of the barn was not bolted shut and it swung open and closed in the wind, hitting against the framing with a thump.

He stopped at the foot of the back steps.

"Connor? Rose?" he shouted again. 'Is anyone home?'

The back door was open and he pulled back the screen door and stepped inside.

Blowflies swarmed over a bowl sitting on the small table just inside the door. They plumed up as Steve stepped closer, revealing a glutinous grey mass underneath that was riddled with maggots. He stepped away, placing a hand over his mouth and allowing the flies to settling back down on the bowl, covering it again.

Next to the bowl sat an old saucer, chipped round its edges. Two cigarette butts lay stubbed out in it, surrounded by ash.

Over in the sink sat a pot with a brown-grey crust on its base. More flies crawled around on its surface.

'Hell-o?' he called out again. 'Is anyone home?'

He walked through to the front room.

Three armchairs were arranged in a semi circle. Next to the largest one sat an empty tea cup and a hard cover book sitting open, its pages splaying out. Steve picked it up, glancing at the spine.

'Wuthering Heights' he said to no one, then placed it back on the chair.

The window was up and Steve walked across to it. The glass had shattered and the wooden framing was pockmarked and splintered. He ran his hand absently over it and peered outside to the porch where fragments of glass and timber were scattered.

'Shotgun' he mumbled to himself.

In the bedroom the drawers of the dresser were open. He looked inside. The half empty drawers contains men's clothes.

The bed was unmade.

Under the window was a shelf made of a length of timber sitting atop a stack of red bricks. Steve ran his fingers through a layer of dust.

A crib sat in the corner. It was stripped bare with no bedding or toys.

Two items hung in the wardrobe. One was a suit, grey and a little old fashioned. Next to it hung an orange paisley dress.