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TURMOIL IN PARADISE

TROUBLE SHOOTER OR HITMAN

M A R K E D M O N D S

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They Called Me A Hitman

Memoir by Mark Edmonds

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DEDICATION

For Carolyn

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CHAPTER 1

Sam Gawler slowly trundled his shabby Humvee into Buckleboo Creek, an industrial town in tropical North Queensland. The car was enveloped in a thick curtain of fog. He had been driving all day from Cairns, the headlamps cutting through the grey blanket as he approached his destination.

Gawler was weary yet restless, tired yet still vigilant. He had no choice but to remain wide awake, no option other than to keep himself completely alert. *Stay with it, he murmured. You won't be able to unravel this sinister puzzle unless you stay totally within the moment.*

He checked his watch. His journey had seemed interminable as he traversed the dreary landscape. Time and memories were his only companions as the Humvee rumbled along the highway. The vehicle had become a place of solitude, a retreat offering him the freedom to clear his mind. Gawler had relished the chance to make this journey. It would provide him with the solitary time he needed.

It was not often in recent memory he had the chance to just sit and think. He took every second for what it was

worth. But mulling over the past soon waned. Gawler's thoughts began focusing on the details of the dangerous project he had been assigned and the possibilities of what he may encounter. He had a preliminary plan of action. But he knew fate. It had a tendency to have the final say in these matters.

His shirt was drenched in perspiration as he closed in on the coast, He lowered the car windows to allow a cool gust of air to wash over him. He breathed deeply, relishing the eucalyptus infused ocean breeze filtering through the forested shoreline to his left. It teased his nostrils, the scent reminding him of how he had been told the locals referred to this time of the year as "the build-up," a precursor to the rapidly approaching tropical monsoon. The monsoon would inevitably bring an inflow of moist north-westerly winds, producing convective clouds that would eventually build up and breakthrough in a continuous torrential downpour.

Gawler eased the engine to a gentle purr. He loosely held the steering wheel, sliding it in his right hand as he steered the car to a turnoff on his left. The Humvee looked well worn. Its rugged patina was peppered with a few bumps and scrapes. There was a patchy coating of dried mud on the once green body which had faded in all the right places. It had a charming kind of threadbare quality. But the decrepit look of the vehicle was deceptive. Gawler did not need a flashy set of wheels that would turn heads. Beneath its battered exterior, the body of the vehicle was a durable and damn-near indestructible beast.

The engine had been tuned to deliver extra grunt. It gave

off a soft throaty throb which hinted at some tantalising performance possibilities. The tyres were heavy duty, all-terrain quality, just as durable on a tarmac highway as on a rugged unmade track. A hidden feature, was the false floor in the rear compartment, which concealed a securely locked built-in steel trunk containing all of the equipment Gawler would need on his sojourn in Buckleboo Creek

Turning his head toward the heavens, Gawler admired the beauty of the sky. The clouds were slowly turning to hues of salmon tinted with traces of tangerine. Night was falling, and the day-dwellers would soon be replaced by the denizens of the night.

Gawler turned right onto the town's main road. He scanned the entrance to the town. He expected this to be a habitat populated mainly by hard working men. Gold mining and processing were what the town was known for. Many of the citizenry working in this remote part of the world had relocated here in a bid to distance themselves from their troubles in the south. The work to be had here was hard and dirty, but as compensation for the tough conditions, a job well done could be very well rewarded.

It was the kind of place promoted in the tourist brochures as a tropical paradise, but the seedy underbelly was a factor that the brochures made no point of mentioning. The kind of trouble brewing in its bowels sometimes attracted men the likes of Sam Gawler.

Gawler was a large unit. At one hundred and ninety-five centimetres, muscled like a line-backer and clocking in at one hundred and forty kilograms, Gawler was the type of individual who tended to attract some members of the

fairer sex, as well as the muscle-bound, testosterone-fuelled heavies of the world. It was expected. The cost of looking the way he did.

Shifting his weight behind the wheel, Gawler cruised down the main street. He casually evaluated the road, which was wide, sparse, dry and dusty. A dilapidated pub stuck out like a sore thumb fifty metres away. The paint on the pub's exterior was peeling. The clapboards hung loose. The corrugated metal roof showed signs of rust. There was a carpark at the side of the pub filled with scrappy looking vehicles of all types and sizes, and beyond that a spectacular view of Albatross Bay.

Gawler lightly applied the brakes as he caught a glimmer of the bay. From his map and based on the planning he had put in; he knew that Albatross Bay was one of the many coves and tributaries around the shores of the Gulf of Capricornia. A picturesque contrast to the dusty main street and the clapped-out old pub.

He brought the Humvee to a halt and gazed at the exterior of the pub. *Two stories*, he deduced, making a mental map of his surroundings. *Balcony on the right with an outside stairway leading up from the yard*. He looked to his left. Out on the street a few men were strolling languidly along the footpath. Just men. No women.

What else is there? he pondered. *Check out the entire area*. He spotted a betting shop to the left of the pub. A bottle shop on its right. Further down the road, Gawler noticed a woman opening the door of a tired looking Chinese café. Beside it was a dusty old general store. Across the road he noted a fuel stop with an adjoining diner. Adjacent to

that was a second-hand tyre yard with used tyres stacked in several unorganized piles. All was quiet. Calm. Serene. And the fact of the matter was that none of it sat well with Gawler—there was always the proverbial quiet before the storm.

Gawler pulled the Humvee into the kerb, opened the door and stepped out onto the rough pavement. Two thugs crashed out of the Chinese café wrestling, locked together and struggling to get a grip on the pistol one of them held by its butt.

They were both heavily built. But not as big as Gawler. One had a barbed wire tattoo across his forehead, the other sported long scraggly, greasy hair and a bushranger's beard. They reeked from the sickly-sweet aroma of the rum seeping from their pores.

The bearded guy had one hand trying to rip the gun away from the hand of the tattooed guy. He was forcing the gun downwards. With his free hand the bearded guy was gouging the face of the tattooed guy who in turn was using his free hand to try and claw the bearded guy's hand away from his face.

Three shots splattered slugs onto the pavement. One of the slugs ricocheted millimetres from Gawler's boot.

The thugs collided heavily with Gawler. One of them screamed "get out of the way you pussy." Gawler thought "*last week I was called a hitman, now I'm a pussy- not possible to be both, this needs to be resolved right now.*"

Gawler used both hands to apply a vice-like grip to each of the thugs' wrists which were still the focus of the wrestle to possess the gun. With a mighty weightlifter's heave, he

wrenched both combatants' arms upwards momentarily lifting both thugs off balance.

The gun was now at chest height pointing upwards with each guy still using one hand to get a controlling grip on it. Another shot rang out and a bullet smashed into the mouth of the tattooed guy. The bullet exited through a large and ugly hole in the back of the tattooed guy's head after blowing fragments of teeth, brain, skull and portions of his face onto the pavement and over the face of the bearded guy. Some smatterings of brain also splattered onto the front window of the Chinese café as the guy fell to the pavement.

As the tattooed guy was falling the bearded guy finally wrenched the gun away from him.

He pointed the gun at Gawler and breathlessly grunted. "You got yourself into something you should have stayed out of you pussy, now you must pay."

Gawler decided to end the conversation before the bearded guy could utter another word. He stepped to one side as he swung his outstretched left arm in an arc extending with full force from his chest and shoulder. He sliced the guy with a backhanded rabbit killer which thumped onto the righthand side of his neck shutting off his arterial artery, - Gawler hoped *temporarily*. Still clutching the gun, the guy fell across his fallen former adversary.

The woman from the Chinese café came rushing out through the glass door. She appeared to Gawler like a normally quiet sort of person. He imagined she only shouted when she got excited.

She screamed.

Gawler said softly to her, “There has been a shooting here. One guy will need an ambulance. I think the other will need a hearse. The guy who did the shooting still has the gun in his hand. His fingerprints will be all over it if anyone cares to investigate.”

The woman said, “We don’t have a hearse in this town. The ambulance usually doubles for it.”

Gawler said, “I think the bearded guy would appreciate it if you could make the call.”

As she ran back inside her café. She shouted, “I’ll call the cops and the ambulance.”

Several of the languid passers-by were starting to gather and gawk, but all-the-while cautiously keeping themselves at a safe distance.

In a few moments the woman from the cafe came back outside and told Gawler that the police were out on a domestic dispute and the local station was shut. She told him her call had been diverted to the nearest police station in Cairns, 800 kilometres to the south. She said a recorded message advised her that the call was important to them, but unfortunately, they could not take her call at the moment, and if she could kindly leave a message, they would get back to her as soon as possible.

Gawler told her, “You have been magnificent in this horrible crisis, but I can’t just idly stand around here any longer in this heat and humidity. I will be in the pub if anybody needs me.”

He said, “my name is Sam Gawler, what’s yours.”

She said, “Krystal Chung, I’m from Shanghai originally.”

He said, “I am glad to meet you Krystal, I’m sorry it had

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to be in such unpleasant circumstances, but I hope we can meet up again when things are a bit quieter. I think maybe I could drop by your café for a meal sometime soon.”

Then they heard the shrill ringing of the phone inside Krystal’s café.

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CHAPTER 2

Gawler strolled down the sidewalk to the pub. He stepped inside through the swinging glass door. The hubbub inside momentarily fell silent as Gawler entered. He noted the movement of heads as all eyes turned his way. With the volume of music, currently blasting The Rolling Stones “Fool To Cry,” through the bar speakers, he surmised most patrons would probably not have noticed the ruckus that had just occurred outside.

Gawler scrutinized his surrounds as he approached the bar. The place was as rough inside as it appeared from the outside. At ground level the bar and dining area was spread across the full width of the building with a kitchen he could see at the back. It was as hot and humid inside as the atmosphere outside and noisy and busy with what looked to Gawler like mine workers and other assorted roughnecks. The air was thick with the aroma of cigarette smoke and perspiring bodies combined with the smell of beer mixed with fumes of grease and onions from the kitchen.

He glanced sideways at a group that had the calculated appearance of gangster heavies. They obviously had no intention to disguise themselves. On the contrary, they

appeared proud of their appearance: massive, gawky, heavily tattooed, lots of gold bling. Their eyes were glued on Gawler as he made his way to the bar. Peripherally, he spotted two of the heavies making their way toward him. *Wonderful*, he thought. *Maybe I'll be making an early acquaintance with a couple of them.*

The two guys followed Gawler to the bar. One on the left. One on the right. As Gawler snagged a barstool, the guy on the left with a thick moustache covering his upper lip cozied up alongside him, the other, with a faded tattoo of a sparrow on his neck, posted up behind him, and together, they waited.

Let them wait, Gawler thought. *I still haven't gotten down to business here.*

The bartender approached. Gawler ordered an orange juice. A few moments later, it arrived, and raising it to his lips, he took a conservative sip to signal his presence.

The moustached guy spoke.

“What’s with the orange juice?” he said.

“It is my beverage of choice” Gawler replied.

“You new in town?” the thug said with a guttural Russian timbre

Gawler picked up his drink and turned away. “What gave it away?”

The guy shrugged. “Everything.”

The other guy jutted his chin. “Why are you here?”

“It’s a bar.” Gawler shrugged. “I’m thirsty, I wanted a drink”

“Why are you in this town?”

“It’s probably as good a town as any.”

The guy with the moustache tugged on Gawler's shirt. "Answer question."

Gawler did not appreciate being tugged at by this thug. He removed the hand from his shirt by grabbing one finger and twisting it backwards until he heard the light a snap of a bone breaking.

The guy stifled a gasp and tried to straighten his broken finger.

Gawler said. "Your accent. Georgian, yes?"

"Answer," the Russian breathlessly grunted into Gawler's ear, "question."

Enough, Gawler thought. *Stop playing with them. You're outnumbered.* "Work," he said out loud.

"What kind?"

"Gold."

"Interesting."

"Not really. Just work."

"Two choices," the other Russian said.

"I'm listening," Gawler replied.

"You watch yourself in this town," the Russian with the moustache said, "or we break your neck."

Sighing, Gawler weighed his options. *It's not worth the trouble. Consider this the price of admission.* He stood beside his stool and looked down on the Russian whose face came up just level with his shoulder. He stepped closer to the Russian until they were toe to toe.

"I could probably break a couple more fingers and more if that is what you are looking for" he said.

The Russian backed off. Gawler understood that this guy needed to save face, but it was not going to happen

tonight. He was going to have to live with his humiliation for now.

The Russian nodded to his partner indicating that they were finished. They shuffled back to their group who had been watching with a certain degree of animation from their position at the side of the room.

Gawler noted the development of a lively discussion in the group. Voices were being raised, chests were being puffed, fingers were being pointed and wagged.

Alone with his drink, Gawler shook his head and gestured to the bartender, a man who appeared to have an unusually strong infatuation with Elvis Presley based on the pointed-toe cowboy boots and pompadour he was sporting.

“I need to book a room,” Gawler said. “One at the back. One on the balcony overlooking the cove.”

The bartender pouted his lip. “Got plenty of those. How long you plan on staying?”

“Let’s call it a week.”

“I will need your credit card details to secure the booking”, the bartender said.

Gawler passed him the credit card.

Several moments later, the bartender slapped the key for a room down in front of Gawler’s orange juice.

Gawler, gesturing to the door, asked the bartender if he had picked up on the incident outside just a while ago.

The bartender huffed. “Saw it through the window.”

“Just curious if that’s going to ruffle any feathers.”

The bartender informed Gawler that one of the men involved in the incident – the tattooed one, went by the

name of “Capable” Elwood, a convict who had recently been released on parole from prison in Melbourne.

Brow furrowed, Gawler asked, “Why do they call him ‘Capable?’”

“Because he’s capable of anything.”

“Not very original.”

“Well, no one’s paying him to write books, last I checked.”

“Sipping his drink,” Gawler said.

“He was shot in the head just now during a fight over a gun with a bearded guy.”

“The bearded guy ended up with a nasty hit to the neck which knocked him out for a while. He probably needs medical attention. I was a by-stander. What are the chances that some of this will come back to bite me in the arse later on?”

The bartender proceeded to tell Gawler that Capable had an issue to resolve with the Russians in Buckleboo Creek regarding a delivery of cocaine he had paid for but had not received. It was an issue high on his list of priorities.

Gawler said, “He doesn’t have any priorities at all now. The Russians will not be troubled by him after today unless they will be wanting to give him a funeral. Basically, he is one less problem that they will need to deal with.”

Gawler prepared to take another sip of his drink. “I expected this to be a sleepy town.”

“This *is* sleepy,” the bartender grunted before moving away to tend to another patron.

Gawler slapped a five dollar note on the bar and worked his way through the crowd towards the swinging door he

had entered through. The group of Russians were still arguing and gesticulating. They glared at Gawler as he strode out the door.

The deceased 'Capable' and his antagonist had been evacuated and were nowhere to be seen. The footpath had been hosed down.

Not wanting to dwell on his reception in the town, and looking forward to some much-needed rest, Gawler piled into his Humvee and drove the few metres to the carpark at the side of the pub. He carried his bag up the back stairs and along the balcony and found his room. After stripping off his clothes and resting his head against the pillow, it took just a couple of minutes for him to drift off to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

There was nothing special about the room. Standard, well-worn, a bit musty. A bathroom off the main bedroom cum living room. The linen looked passably clean.

He had slept solidly. It was now later than usual for him to start his day. He had slept with the sliding doors to the balcony open to get some air circulating. He felt refreshed after such a good night's sleep.

He had been woken by the music from downstairs subtly seeping through the door to the balcony. Someone down below grunted in Russian. The volume was turned up in reply. Gawler found himself being serenaded by Bob Seger's "Night Moves." He couldn't for the life of him guess why the Russians were so privy to American choices in music.

Moving to the bathroom he stepped into the shower and relaxed under the strong pressure of the steaming hot water. He soaped himself thoroughly and washed his hair. He finished showering with a long burst of icy cold water to close his pores and tighten his skin.

He towelled himself dry and sat on the bed, massaging the back of his neck to relieve the residual tension from the previous day's long journey. He dressed in his work gear, a

pair of light cotton tan work pants and a similarly coloured long sleeved cotton shirt. Later he would put on his steel capped work boots.

Swinging his legs around, he sat back, and folded his hands across his chest. He was feeling relaxed, ready for the day ahead.

He had flown directly to Australia after a series of briefing meetings at the mining company's London head office. The company, Consolidated Rutile, his "employer," for lack of a better way of putting it, was a huge international conglomerate. Gold mining at Buckleboo Creek was important to the corporation, but it was just one of their activities. The company had worldwide operations in mining, mineral processing and shipping coal, iron ore, bauxite, fertilizers, and various other commodities. It was a big powerful corporation with world-wide connections and influence into the high-level inner sanctums of governments, banks, corporations and non-government organisations. But the politics, the bottom line, and the inner workings of the company had nothing to do with Gawler. Those things concerned him not in the slightest. If a term had to be applied to the work he did for the company, "muscle" was the closest thing to it. Some called him a hitman, but he was not comfortable with this depiction of his role.

He was a trusted "trouble shooter" for the company as one executive had phrased it. Gawler was the man they called upon when sticky situations required an unorthodox solution. He was not an employee. He was a gun for hire. The agreement Gawler had with the company guaranteed

him that the company would always provide all the support and resources he needed. They expected him to do the job his way. The company wanted results from Gawler, but they didn't always want to know the details of how he got them. They understood that he cut corners and pushed boundaries, and he was paid handsomely to get the job done. But Gawler always had no doubt that if he stepped over the line the company would deny all knowledge of him.

He was comforted with the unwritten understanding he had with the company that they would always back him to the hilt behind the scenes. He preferred the anonymity. Freedom was something he cherished more than the dollar.

Gawler and the chief executive of the company, James Wallbridge, were buddies going back to their university days. They had met while studying engineering together at Melbourne University. At the time, Gawler had a serious interest in playing Australian Rules football. He was courageous, strongly muscled, with great ball to eye coordination and quick.

He had played in the ruck with the university team and had done well enough to get a few games with a team in the professional Australian Football League. Thanks to a wrecked knee achilleas ligament, his potential professional career had been cut short.

By contrast James was more interested in surfing, so the two friends had spent many lazy days together chasing waves at the surf beaches along the Victorian coast. They both had a lifelong passion for opera. They had enjoyed countless hours together absorbing the great operas. After

graduation both James and Gawler had been recruited into engineering jobs with Consolidated Rutile in Australia.

James was a born diplomat.

At first glance James looked like a stereotypical bank manager. Of medium height with chubby rosy cheeks, granny glasses and a softly spoken manner. He could charm the birds from the trees with ease. *Good old James*, Gawler ruminated as he drew a deep breath.

After earning his stripes running engineering management projects for the company across Australia, James rapidly came to the notice of the company's top management. He was fast tracked through some testing management roles across the company internationally. To the surprise of many people who knew him, James had rapidly risen to the supreme position of Chief Executive of the corporation based in London. His congenial personality, engineering knowhow and diplomatic skills had served him well. He got big things done and was the perfect public face for the company.

By the time the company grew, and by default more tricky problems were cropping up, stronger hands were needed on deck when negotiations in the conference rooms became futile. James needed muscle. He needed a man he could trust to handle the on-site squabbles and malfeasances. Naturally, Gawler had been his first and only choice.

Gawler had spent several years travelling to sort out difficult issues at the company's trouble spots in many parts of the world. He had always come up trumps. But his solutions were not necessarily totally orthodox.

He had been summoned to London to catch up with

James who had surmised that Gawler needed a distraction after his wife of two years had passed away unexpectedly from a mis-diagnosed case of incurable cancer.

James said “We have a problem in Buckleboo Creek – far north Queensland. As usual I want to send you out to get on top of it. Whatever way you see fit. The usual financial arrangement. You can come and go as you please. But we will need you there now.”

The reply from Gawler came in the form of a nod. If anything, a distraction was needed from the sorrow and heartache that plagued him recently like a terminal nightmare.

He’d be dead in six months from doing something unorthodox or from simply getting himself into a no-win situation if he didn’t find a reason to at the very least to keep moving. “Sure,” he said flatly. “I’ll take the gig whatever it is.”

James turned to Gawler. “You okay?” he asked.

Gawler said, “As in?”

“As in, you look a little strung out.”

“If it’s a question of my effectiveness?”

“It’s not.” James. replied “You could have one of your legs or arms dismembered and you could still beat a man senseless if necessary. It’s like a gift. You’re a cat with nine lives, my friend.”

Sighing, Gawler said, “Then what are we talking about here?”

James appeared reticent, taking a pause before replying to Gawler’s inquiry. “You lost your wife, mate,” he said

solemnly. “Anyone in that position would have a right to slacken off *mentally*.”

Gawler had known that if he didn’t do something, anything, he would join Sarah in the afterlife quicker than he had intended. If life after death was a certainty, which Gawler doubted, the only thing he knew was that Sarah would greet him with that same subtle disdain she displayed when he did not give her the respect she demanded.

She would be more than displeased if Gawler had checked out on life early. James’ pitch to him of sorting whatever issues were interfering with the corporation’s business in Buckleboo Creek was a welcome reprieve.

With Sarah’s sudden death, Gawler had all but shut down whatever responsibilities he had. He collected on her life insurance policy, sold their house in Melbourne and combined the proceeds to purchase a rundown apartment on the 56th floor of Eureka Tower in Southbank by the Yarra River.

He’d negotiated a good deal on the purchase. The apartment was in bad shape. Dilapidated to put it mildly. Crowds of people inspected the place when it had been placed on the market, but the upshot was no-one wanted it. Except for Gawler. He saw the value of the location. It had a view overlooking the wide expanse of Port Phillip Bay which to Sam was worth a million dollars.

He had found himself to be in the perfect negotiating space to make a very reasonable cash offer which was accepted with alacrity.

He spent his time over the following months stripping the apartment back to its bones and then renovating it until

he had created a fabulous home. It was something many people could only dream of. The project was therapeutic. He loved the result. But his problem remained the same, Sarah was no longer with him to share the results of his labours. He still had difficulty comprehending that this was the one thing that nobody on earth could change.

“So,” Gawler said to James “what’s next?”

“Buckleboo Creek” James said. We’ll get you squared away and go from there.”

The meetings Gawler attended during the London visit took two days. The Chief Security Officer of Consolidated Rutile, Joe Malthouse, a former military police officer with a bear of a body, joined with James Wallbridge as they walked Gawler through the details of the company’s problems at the Australian gold mine at Buckleboo Creek. They examined the layout drawings of the processing plant and discussed the performance figures available to them for many items of equipment at the plant. They reviewed the gold production figures which were dismal. And they discussed the rising crime wave being generated by mobster syndicates internationally and across the country. The company was of the view that crime was impacting on their gold productivity.

“The company,” Joe said, “is concerned that the amount of gold being produced at the plant was slipping from what is expected. I’m suspecting that the operation of the Buckleboo Creek facility has been infiltrated. Security has

possibly been compromised. It appears as though a criminal mob operation may have been put in place at Buckleboo Creek. Tentacles of the mob could have spread through to the processing plant,” he gestured to Gawler, “we want you to look for signs of gangsters in the town and at the plant.”

This mine was no small operation. They were bringing up three and a half tons of ore from underground to the surface to get an ounce of gold. Each year they were crushing and processing fifteen million tons of ore to produce five hundred thousand ounces of gold. If the odd kilogram or two of gold was missing from the mine’s output, the company would come looking for it. If ten kilos were missing, they would be seriously looking.

Joe outlined a serious problem the company was aware of in the town: drug trafficking. The company was not interested in getting into the business of drug busting but if there was some connection between drug trafficking and the gold losses they would definitely need to be interested.

“Some entities,” Joe said, puffing his chest, “whoever they may be, are disrupting our daily operations. The situation is getting urgent now. We need you to find them, draw them out...” he cast an ominous glance at James, “and move them on.” Joe passed a small electronic device to Gawler. It looked like a mobile phone. It had previously been one but now it was an AnOm, a high-tech encrypted communication device. It did not take phone calls, just encrypted texts. This AnOm Joe was passing to him was tuned into the frequency being used by the Russian criminal syndicates in Australia. The little device would give Gawler an advantage over any Russian criminal

mob operating in Buckleboo Creek. He could monitor all of their communications. He was fluent in Russian, which was a big plus for him, but he did not feel any need to let this be widely known in the location he would be heading to.

“Find out what’s going on,” Joe said with a glimmer in his eye, “and shut it down.”

Unusually for him, Gawler kept his next thoughts to himself.

This guy has to be kidding me. He thought. He doesn't get out of the office enough. I'm single handed. To do what he is talking about we would need a battalion. But I'm in it for better or worse. Forge onwards Sam. No matter what is in store, you will find a way.

As Gawler, James and Joe concluded their meeting James assured Gawler that if he ever needed back-up or resources any call by him to the Chief Executive’s office in London would always receive top priority.

Don't you worry about that my friend, he thought. My guess is you will be getting plenty of calls from me out in the Badlands, and they may not be at a time convenient to your comfortable lifestyle.

Arrangements had been made by the corporation for Gawler to report at the mine under cover as a safety inspector. This would give him unhindered access to all parts of the gold processing operations. But Gawler knew he would be closely watched by unseen eyes as he

moved around the plant. His priority was to track down the pathway out of the plant being used to spirit away the missing gold.

Restless with his mind running in circles, Gawler snapped his attention to the tasks ahead for him in the day ahead. He forced himself to get moving. He put on his work boots and moved to the door. He knew the plan. He had gone over it often enough. Closing his eyes, he focused on his breathing, counting each breath. He recalled Sarah's smiling face as she generously greeted him each time he returned home from a project and her throaty laughter when she found something amusing, which was often. Squeezing his eyelids tight, Gawler tried to focus on the sounds of Bob Seger (and the occasional grunt from a Russian down below) to assist him to get moving.

CHAPTER 4

Gawler checked his watch. It was after eight in the morning. His stomach grumbled, a bit of nausea riding shotgun along with it. He needed to eat. Maybe some strong coffee as well.

Gawler had been told that Buckleboo Creek was salt-water crocodile territory. He was told the “Salties” were active at night and were never far away from the water’s edge.

He vaguely remembered being disturbed during the night by some thumping noises from the cove below— he assumed that was the sound the crocks made as they moved out of the water and onto the muddy banks of the cove. It seemed the crocks were not so very far away from him right at this moment as he sat in his room in the pub above the shore on the Cove of Albatross Bay.

He headed downstairs and took a seat at a small table in a dining area in a section of the pub’s downstairs lounge not far from the bar. A meal of a large medium rare T-bone steak, onions and roast vegetables washed down with good strong coffee filled the bill just fine for Gawler. He noted

that the food was top fare. It had to be for the pub to survive. Hard workers demanded quality sustenance.

According to the bartender, most of the Russians had stayed late and all but a couple of stragglers had vacated the bar hours earlier. Gawler inquired about the whereabouts of the local police who seemed nowhere to be found during the incident on the street the previous night. The bartender told him that the police presence in the town amounted to just a two-person team, a husband and wife, who were usually tied up at the station with routine paperwork. The police building included their living quarters which were at the back of the main section. The building also housed a small lockup, also at the back. The bartender told Gawler that it would usually take the police at least an hour to arrive at an incident. Gawler felt strangely comforted. Most people would feel reassured by the presence of the authorities close by, but for Gawler, the further away they were from the kind of hands-on approach he used to his job, the better.

Gawler asked the bartender, "What's your name?"

"Clint," the bartender replied.

"You seem to have a pretty good feel for what happens in this town?"

"It's a small town. We all catch the same cold at the same time."

"I want a little bit of background information."

"What do you want to know?"

Gawler said, "You seem to be pretty much in-tune with the comings and goings of these Russians hanging around here."

“You could say that.”

“How long have they been stooging around?”

“A few months, and ever since they arrived there has been trouble.”

“What do they do for money? Do they splash it about?”

Clint shrugged. “Everybody here knows they are into drugs, what else?”

“They are tight with their money but it’s obvious they’ve got plenty. They can spread it around when it suits.

Gawler raised his brow. “You seem pretty confident that drugs are what they are here for.”

“Had four workers overdose on some stepped-on merchandise they purchased from the Russians.” The bartender crossed his arms.

“Tell me, before I answer any more questions, who are you?”

“My name is Sam Gawler.”

“Well, Sam,” Clint said, “I’d like to know why you’re snooping around. Are you a cop?”

“Far from it.”

“Who do you work for?”

“I am here on an assignment for the Consolidated Rutile Corporation. As I am sure you would know, they are the owners of the Buckleboo Creek gold mine and processing plant which basically dominates everything in this town.”

“And what is it exactly that you do for them?”

“I am a Safety Inspector. I am looking over all aspects of the company’s operation to make sure everything is safe and nobody working here gets injured.”

Clint was satisfied with what he heard.

“Fair enough.” He started wiping down the counters.
“Now, how can I help you?”

“I’m looking for some background details.”

“In regard to what, exactly?”

“The drugs problem you mentioned.”

Gawler drew a deep breath to accompany his words.

“The problem may be much bigger than it appears to someone just strolling down the main street of Buckleboo Creek.

“My company believes that Buckleboo Creek could be an entry point for drugs into Australia from places like South America, maybe Mexico or perhaps some shithole in Asia.

“If that is the case, then right here and now we are potentially facing the pointy end of a diverse array of underworld figures. Things could get very nasty here. When drugs arrive in town, trouble always follows. I’ve been informed by the security chief at my company that the Russian mobsters’ main source of income in Australia is illegal drugs. High prices are being fetched on the streets for methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, MDMA. Cocaine being shipped to Australia is selling wholesale for \$175,000 a kilogram. The Russian syndicate’s operations are widespread. They range from drug trafficking to money laundering and even murder.”

Clint shrugged. “Sounds like you’ve sniffed out the information for yourself well enough.”

Gawler said, “But there’s more. It is a possibility that the drug syndicate has spread its tentacles into the gold

plant and if this is the case there is a big problem for the corporation.

The sight of Russian thugs meandering around your fair town does not auger well for the continuation of good relationships.”

Clint said, “I’m not sure if I can help you with these issues my friend.”

“I’m sure that’s the case.” But you sound like a straight up guy to me. If you hear anything in the future that might be of interest to me, I would appreciate it. I am sure you would be well looked after if you get my meaning.”

With that, Gawler set about heading to the company’s base of operations to meet with the person whose name he had been given as a contact for the moment he arrived.

CHAPTER 5

Gawler drove to the entrance of the gold processing plant. To the civilian observer, it would look like a substantial operation. He heard a steady hum of machinery emanating from the site as he approached the dry and dusty looking entrance.

The appearance of the place was what he expected. He was facing a huge open-sided warehouse type building about the size of a football field which housed an array of grinding, screening, pumping, and milling equipment. There were numerous lines of various sized pipes running along the sides of the structure connecting between the pumps and tanks. They were mounted on racks fixed to steel columns which also supported the roof of the building. A number of huge liquid storage tanks were sited outside the building.

An enormous cylindrical open topped thickening tank stood in a dedicated section adjacent to the main building. A belt conveyor was transporting primary crushed gold ore from a stockpile in the distance not far from a prominent hoisting tower which housed the steel cables supporting the lifts which provided access to the underground mine.

Workers wearing white hard hats could be seen driving forklifts moving purposefully around the facilities.

There was a massive steel communications tower set on a rise at the rear of the plant. A wedgetail eagle's nest was sited comfortably on the top of the tower. *The eagles have chosen the most strategic location*, he mused. A razor wire topped chain-link fence standing three metres high traced the entirety of the establishment which rested on what appeared to be a giant field of granite. Surveillance cameras were noticeable at strategic locations around the perimeter of the site.

The place gave off the impression of being a busy, dusty noisy and well-run operation.

Gawler rolled his Humvee up to the guard house at the plant entrance. He was received by a uniformed security guy wearing a baseball cap with the logo for Consolidated Rutile on the brim in the form of the letter "C" and "R" in thick ruby stitching.

"How can I help you?" the guard asked. Judging by his curt manner Gawler thought he seemed to be wary of visitors.

"Name's Gawler. I'm here to see Natasha Timoshenko."

The guard called it in. A moment later the boom gate ahead of Gawler opened. The guard directed him to drive down to the offices on the far side of the compound.

Waiting for Gawler was a tall, elegant dark haired young woman. Gawler figured she would probably be thirty, give or take a couple of years. An outline of an athletic and toned body was noticeable through her work overalls.

"You're Gawler?" she asked as he slipped out of the

car. Gawler nodded. "Yes, that I am. You must be Natasha."

She shook his head. "Natasha Timoshenko. A pleasure to meet you. Your arrival has been expected. I have been requested to take you on a tour of the plant."

Gawler sensed that Natasha was cool, friendly, and professional. He noted an air of efficiency in her manner. She spoke perfect English with the slight trace of a Russian accent. This rang a note of caution for him. He became guarded.

Perhaps it was possible he thought that she could be involved in the mobster's operation. But surely not. He didn't want to let himself think that could be the case. The mobsters were thugs, clearly well out of her league.

Gawler noticed the smooth motions in the way she moved. Perhaps she was a dancer or maybe a gymnast. There was an elegance in her movement. She was wearing the company's standard green boiler suit with a white safety hard hat and steel capped boots. She carried noise blocking earmuffs.

"You'll want these," she said. "It gets rather noisy inside the processing areas."

Taking the earmuffs, Gawler followed Natasha as she made her way into the processing plant. She showed Gawler to the men's change room off to the left of the entrance. An attendant provided him with an outfit identical to Natasha's.

"Ready?" she asked. Gawler nodded. "Ready," he replied. Together they moved through the plant examining equipment and process operations. Gawler carried a check

list on a clipboard and made notes as they moved through the plant. The noise inside the plant from the crushing and screening machinery prevented any conversation between them. They communicated by pointing and hand signals.

As well as his clipboard notes, Gawler was mentally recording his observations throughout the tour. The layout. The appearance of the general employees working inside the plant. Were they attentive or slightly distracted? Was there an attitude of confidence or diffidence about them? He was also observing the movements of the operators of the equipment who were doing routine jobs, minding their own business, keeping away from anything dangerous.

Three robust women were doing heavy lifting and shovelling work around a noisy ball mill. They were covered in dust, sweating heavily and grunting audibly over the hubbub of the plant. Gawler didn't envy the physical effort they were required to put into their jobs.

Turning to their right, they came across a powerfully built tall young engineer taking instrument readings at one of the machines. He had a big toothy smile for Natasha, very warm with a familial kind of affection. After briefly looking over the general layout of the plant, they stepped outside where the noise from the plant was a little less than a dull roar. "Apologies for the noise," Natasha said. "Not necessary" he said. "It is expected." Gawler recalled the toothy smile of the friendly guy they had crossed paths with inside the plant. He noted that he bore some similar features to Natasha. "That young guy we just met," he said. "Is he a relative?" Natasha smiled. "Very good, Mister Gawler. He is my brother. His name is Oleg."

“I had no idea that Consolidated Rutile was a family-run operation.”

“It seems that friendly faces have been employed across the board, Mister Gawler. I have heard that you’re an acquaintance of the CEO.”

“Please call me Sam” he said.

“Everyone calls me Natasha” she replied.

“I must say, I’m not quite sure why you are here, or what your job with Consolidated Rutile entails. No offense she said.”

“None taken,” Gawler said. “My visit is all about safety. I have been engaged to undertake a safety audit of the entire plant. I hope you will be available to assist me as I work my way right through this facility. Safety means security and we don’t want anyone working here to be injured in any way.

“That makes sense, everyone here will agree with that,” she said. “There have been a few problems lately caused by some shady characters lurking around the town. Some of them seem to have connections with several of the people working here.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m here. I don’t suppose you have any insight on this?”

She shrugged. “Nothing that comes to mind. I’ve only heard rumours, really.”

“Anything of note?”

“Not specifically. But the one thing that I can assure you is that all employees under my watch have been properly vetted and will continue to be as long as they are here.”

“I have no doubt that the people you oversee are properly, as some might say, ‘vetted’ to the point of exhaustion.”

“But” she said with a dour tone, “you will still be looking into them, nonetheless.”

It’s my job. I hope you don’t take any offense at this.”

“I’m disappointed,” Natasha said, “that you will be looking into people that I can vouch for without any hesitancy.”

Gawler held up his hand. “I won’t interfere with the flow of operations. As soon as I clear your people, I will move forward and let you get on with your job. And I want to impress on you that I will cause you no delays or hold-ups whatsoever.”

Smiling, Natasha said, “I appreciate that, Sam. Now,” she crossed her arms, “how can I better assist you in working through this exercise of yours?”

“A list of all your employees,” Gawler said. “Timecards, rosters, incident reports, things of that nature.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Also, I would like you to join me in a drink sometime soon if that would be convenient.”

Natasha blushed. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

The idea of dating anyone, much less spending a casual evening out, was something far from Gawler’s list of priorities. Sure, he thought, this woman is clearly attractive and bright, to say the least. But Sarah’s passing was still fresh in his mind. It prevented him from even the slightest urge to get involved in a romantic nature with anyone. “No,” he said with a flat tone. “I would just like to spend a little time chatting with you to get to know more about

your life here in this dusty little town when you are not tied up in this noisy workplace.”

Perhaps she was a little disappointed by his response. Her smile faded and was replaced momentarily by slight frown. “I see,” she said smiling again. “Well, my workday ends at six. Let’s meet for a drink after that?”

“Great,” Gawler said. “Do you have a place in mind?”

“There’s a pub of sorts in the town. It also serves as a motel. Maybe you know it already?”

Gawler grinned. “I do.”

“Good. Then I can meet you there at six-thirty, if that works for you?”

“It does.”

Natasha smiled, half turned and started walking towards the office block, As she walked away she looked back and said, “It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Mister Gawler.”

Gawler said, “Likewise, Natasha.”

Gawler watched Natasha as she walked back to the processing plant, intrigued by the young woman in a way he could not yet articulate. But musing about her quickly faded as his focus shifted to a man who walked out of the warehouse, his gaze fixed on Gawler with the kind of intensity that made Gawler’s flesh creep. As Gawler locked eyes with the man, he noted that his right arm was limp and hanging uselessly by his side. *Unusual to see a disabled guy on the job here*, he mused.

CHAPTER 6

Natasha arrived at the bar promptly at six-thirty as arranged. Other than Clint, the bar was vacant. This suited Gawler, though he was curious as to the whereabouts of the Russian clientele whom he had noticed seemed to flock to this place. Gawler waved a greeting to Natasha as she entered the bar through the swinging glass door.

She was wearing a light cotton yellow halter topped frock which reached to mid-thigh. Her firm tanned legs were showstoppers.

He tore his eyes away from her legs.

“Good evening,” she said as she slipped onto the stool next to him.

“Good evening,” Gawler replied.

Natasha ordered a gin and tonic.

“How did the rest of your day work out?”

“Quite well. No hiccups, other than a blown bearing on a pump. We had a spare pump assembly and the whole thing was changed over without a hitch.”

“Cost of doing business.”

“It was nothing out of the normal workday.”

Clint returned with Natasha's gin and tonic. He told Natasha that the drink had been paid for in advance.

"Thank you," Natasha said to Gawler.

"Thank the company," Gawler said. "It's on their dollar."

"I'll be sure to do that." She sipped her drink conservatively before setting it down.

"Now," she said. "What would you like to discuss?"

"Well, perhaps some more about you, for starters."

"I was under the impression this *wasn't* a date."

"It's not."

She chuckled. "So, it would appear I am not free from being examined during the course of your 'investigation'."

"Gawler said. "It's nothing personal."

"I have no problem discussing my history with you. What would you like to know?"

Gawler propped his elbow on the bar counter and rested his chin in his palm. "Whatever you are willing to tell me."

"Well, for starters, I'm from Melbourne."

Gawler's said, "Well, that is a coincidence."

She smiled. "Why is that?"

"That's where I'm from as well."

"How curious. But of course, we move in different circles. It's too bad we never crossed paths informally."

"What made you leave Melbourne? Buckleboo Creek isn't exactly a hot spot, so to speak."

Natasha's glanced toward the ceiling. "Well," she began, "I graduated as an engineer and worked for a while in a job designing agricultural machinery, but my true love had always been playing the violin. So, I soon quit my engineering job and began studying violin at the

Conservatorium of Music in Melbourne. My ambition for a long time had been to join the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.”

Gawler said, “Why didn’t you?”

“I took a break from my studies and came to Buckleboo Creek with my brother Oleg. I wanted to keep an eye on him.”

“Why is that that?”

Natasha sighed. “Oleg’s a bit, well, *slow*, so to speak. He always has been. But he’s a hard worker. He takes any odd job that comes his way. Anyway, when he found work for the company up here, I felt I should follow him. Most of the money I’ve been earning, other than paying for our day-to-day expenses, has been saved away so that I can resume my violin studies later in Melbourne.”

“Are you planning on going back?”

“I am. I just felt it was a lucky break that Consolidated Rutile had an opening at the plant which I was well-suited for. Oleg and I applied to work on the same shift rosters. It suited us both to work identical hours each day. And in the end, we would be able to walk away without burning any bridges.”

Gawler decided to press her for more details. Natasha then happily told him more: her family history, her love for the violin, her passion for basketball. In Melbourne, she had played in the centre for the women’s team, The Vixens. She was dreaming about getting back onto the basketball court before not too long.

“But your accent,” Gawler said. “It’s Russian.”

“My family,” Natasha said, “had come to Melbourne

from Russia when I was very little. They have been living in Melbourne for a long time now.” She said that members of the Russian diaspora in Melbourne had connections who found the work at Consolidated Rutile for both Oleg and then for Natasha. She told Gawler that Oleg was well known in the Russian expatriate community in Melbourne as a keen scuba diver.

Russians in Buckleboo Creek had let it be known that they were looking for someone with the scuba skills Oleg had. They sought him out. As quid-pro-quo for the assistance the Russians gave Oleg to win an introduction to the mining company and to then secure his employment, the contacts in Buckleboo Creek had requested that Oleg include his scuba diving equipment with his baggage when he travelled to the site. They told him it might come in handy.

Natasha was thorough and answered every one of Gawler’s questions without hesitation, but he now wondered whether Oleg had been duped into bringing his scuba gear with him to Buckleboo Creek.

The story wasn’t adding up. He wondered. *“Who in their right mind goes scuba diving in crocodile territory?”*

“Why did your family leave Russia?” he asked.

“When I was very young,” Natasha explained, “my family lived at a Russian Naval base in the Arctic Circle. My father was a specialist in the design of submarine propulsion systems. He was highly skilled in the field, but he had somehow fallen out with the authorities over a political disagreement. Then he had been declared as not a suitable person to work at the base.

“The family had been unceremoniously moved on and had basically got the message that they needed to leave Russia for their own wellbeing. My parents eventually found their way to Israel. From Israel we migrated to Australia.

“When we arrived in Australia, my father had been amazingly fortunate to be snapped up by the Australian government to work on the design and manufacture of a new fleet of submarines, the Connor Class. There was a shortage of people in Australia with knowledge and experience in this type of work, so my father had steady work for years on the project. He loved his job. He spent months every year travelling to Europe liaising with overseas design teams on the project. Life was great for him. He was a happy man. After enduring such a difficult time in Russia, he had eventually flourished in his career here in Australia. Now he’s retired in Melbourne.”

Gawler had been fascinated listening to Natasha talk about her life, her hopes and her dreams. He was drawn to her. He sensed a chemistry stirring between them. But his heart was telling him to resist. He couldn’t act on his feelings. It simply wasn’t an option. He felt as though Sarah was gazing reprovingly towards him at that very moment.

“That’s quite the history,” Gawler said. “Very impressive.”

She smiled. “Am I cleared as a suspect in this investigation of yours?”

Sure, Gawler thought, *at least for now*. “At the moment I can’t see why there would be any reason one earth for you to cause any safety or security problem for the company.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I don’t want to say anything on the record.”

“Well,” Natasha said, “then tell me a little bit about yourself, Sam Gawler.”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

Gawler wasn’t inclined to run down his history. It felt paltry. Insignificant. “Much like your brother,” he said, “I go where the work takes me.”

Natasha looked at him curiously. “I’m still a little unsure exactly what the nature of your job involves.”

“I don’t want to put you off.”

“I’m a product of Russia, Mister Gawler. I’ve seen worse. Believe me.”

The mention of seeing “worse things” conjured up images of the limp-armed man Gawler had spotted outside the processing plant. “Speaking of which,” he said, “I saw a man at the worksite today. He was disabled with one arm hanging limply by his side. He looked at me like a man who was about to flee from being questioned by the cops.”

Natasha nodded. “Ah, yes. ‘Limpy?’”

Gawler furrowed his brow. “Limpy?”

“That’s his nickname. His real name is Alex Dimitrov. He lost the use of his arm during a boozy fishing expedition six months ago. A crocodile shredded his arm. He was drunk. Apparently, he was leaning over the side of the boat trying to throw some bait to lure fish when a crocodile came from out of nowhere and grabbed his arm. It didn’t take his arm off, but you can see the damage it did.”

Gawler had heard about the crocodile population in this

part of the world. The rumour was that there was close to one crocodile per person in this neighbourhood.

Gawler winced at the thought of shredding an arm in a tug of war with a crocodile, but he had seen much worse. “And how,” he said, “does a man with a useless limb still manage to stay on staff at Consolidated Rutile?”

“They can’t let him go,” Natasha said. “It’s part of a workers’ compensation deal he struck with the company. He had been let go after the ordeal, mind you, but the day before he was set to leave, they kept him on.”

“Do you know the details as to how that came about?”

Natasha’s tone wavered to a more querulous pitch. “I’m not sure,” she said. “One of the higher-ups handled it. I’d be happy to ask more about it.”

After hearing the tale of Limpy, combined with the reveal about how Oleg was instructed to bring scuba equipment to a job that didn’t require it and into crocodile territory to boot, Gawler sensed that he was getting closer to the truth. It was like a lingering scent wafting in from a kitchen, one that teased the nostrils and kept him guessing. It was like wondering about a mystery meal that was being prepared for supper.

“You’ve been wonderfully helpful,” Gawler said. “I appreciate it.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Natasha said as she finished her drink. “Now,” she flattened her palms on the counter, “I still want to hear more about *you*.”

“Just like I said,” Gawler shrugged. “There’s not much to tell.”

“I don’t think that’s true, at all. You must have a story.

You must have family.” She bit her lip. “A girlfriend, perhaps, maybe a wife.”

The comment made Gawler’s heart drop. His memories of his courtship and wedding to Sarah. Recollections of their romantic life which they had enjoyed with gusto. The children they had planned for. Thinking about her death always made him feel as if his gut had dropped to his boots.

He wanted to talk more with Natasha. He wanted to connect more deeply with this woman who seemed able to put him at ease more than anyone he had been close to in more than a year. He just simply couldn’t find the words. Thinking of a way out, Gawler said, “I’ll tell you what. We can meet up again tomorrow to discuss that stuff and also some more about your friend Limpy. I have a few calls to make to the head office tonight before I head to bed.”

“Deal,” Natasha said. “I actually need to get back home to check on Oleg. But I want to be clear. She said in a definite tone. Limpy is no friend of mine.”

She finished her drink and stood as she bade Gawler goodnight and headed to the door. Gawler watched wistfully as she left. Her final words about Limpy seemed ominous. He felt bad, not only about Sarah’s death and the memories that still haunted him but by the fact that, no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t seem to manage a close connection with another woman. He sighed and ordered another orange juice from Clint. He slowly finished the drink before starting to think about how he could learn some more about the Consolidated Rutile employee conveniently known as “Limpy.”

CHAPTER 7

Gawler made his way up the pub's back stairs to his room. He opened the door, slipped off his jacket, and retrieved his cell phone from his pocket. He searched through his four contact numbers. Each one held a prominent position within Consolidated Rutile. He selected James' number.

"Evening, mate!" James greeted. "What time is it?"

"Late at my end. Where are you?"

"London. A few fires at the home office."

"Is now a good time?" Gawler inquired as he heard an unmistakable clanking of dish and silverware in the background.

"Just sitting down for dinner," James said. "Hold on one second."

Gawler sat on the edge of his bed, switching the phone to his other ear as he felt a light headache building in the back of his neck. *Fool*, he thought. *Learn to pace your orange juice. It's starting to catch up with you.*

"Go ahead," James said.

Gawler rolled his head in a semi-circle to work out the knots in his neck. "I need some information on one of

the workers I crossed paths with down here. Name's Alex Dimitrov."

"Dimitrov?"

"You got it."

"That doesn't sound familiar."

"Well, he's more commonly known as Limpy."

"Ah!" James remarked with a note of recognition. "I heard in passing about him. We had to file a medical insurance claim from this end. Got his arm shredded."

Gawler said. "I'm surprised you would be tracking an employee down so far in the pecking order."

"Usually, I wouldn't. But there was a hubbub about that crazy Limpy guy when it happened. Apparently, he got his arm shredded when he was out fishing with his drunken mates. He had somehow ended up having a tug of war with a crocodile hanging off his arm. When the crocodile eventually gave up, he fell backwards into the boat. His mates managed to power their little boat to shore, they dragged him out onto the bank but then they couldn't figure out what to do next.

A guy on the shore had seen what happened and had already called the district nurse. Limpy had lost a lot of blood by the time she arrived. She stopped the bleeding but said she couldn't save the arm. She wanted to amputate it on the spot.

Dimitrov- Limpy, swore at her and screamed," you're not amputating my arm you rotten bitch." She backed off and called the air ambulance. They flew him 800 kilometres to the nearest hospital in Cairns. The surgeons at the hospital worked for hours to save what was left of his shredded arm

but it would no longer be a workable limb. In the end they decided not to amputate. He eventually returned to work and was put on light duties.”

Gawler asked, “Why wasn’t he let go? Having the use of both arms would seem a necessity in a place like a gold plant.”

“It is,” James said. “But Limpy threatened to call in some lawyers if we didn’t cover his medical expenses.”

Gawler furrowed his brow, “The accident didn’t have anything to with company work. He was off-the-clock, so to speak.”

“Well, Limpy lined up some high-powered lawyer who was threatening to take us to the cleaners. They wouldn’t have won the case, everyone knew that. But Limpy seemed to have some pretty powerful support in the background which we never got a proper handle on. How he was proposing to pay the lawyer was a mystery to us.

“They were threatening us with years of litigation. It would have cost a bomb. But that wasn’t the main point. The issue we faced was that we didn’t need right then to wage an ugly legal skirmish against a popular guy around town. Not good for the company image in a small place. Best for us to cave and swallow the costs of Limpy’s legal and medical bills. It was neater to settle the thing that way.”

Gawler said, “I need all the information you have on Limpy along with the details of his settlement with the company.”

“Sure thing,” James said. “I’ll need a day or two.”

“Not a problem.”

“Anything else?”

He recalled her smiling face. The young woman he had spent time with earlier; “Natasha Timoshenko.”

James chuckled. “What about her?”

“I met her at the plant today.”

James said, “She’s quite something, eh?”

“Yeah,” Gawler said, “She is for sure.” He felt a warm sensation in his chest. “She was quite helpful, gave me a thorough tour of the processing plant.”

“Try and keep it cool mate,” James said. “I know you need some female company, but it’s best for us if you keep things strictly business for now.”

“Of course, I will *mother*.”

“Hey,” I’m just trying to help you stay on track.”

Gawler said,” She was the person who told me a little bit about our man Limpy. She’s getting together all the information they have on Limpy along with some of the other dubious employees so that I can run through the details. I just wanted the official record on Limpy from you in case there’s something she couldn’t dig up.”

“Understood. Anything else?”

“Natasha has a brother, Oleg. I want you to pull up anything and everything you have on him, as well.”

“Sure thing,” James said. “You starting to sniff out a trail?”

“Not sure,” Gawler said. “But my gut is telling me I might be.”

James laughed. “Sit tight. I’ll have everything to you within a day or two.”

“Outstanding.”

“Goodnight, mate.”

Gawler shut off the phone and tossed it on the bed. Kicking off his shoes, he laid back, closing his eyes with the certainty that the details he was searching for would soon become clearer.

His dream that night was more a memory. He was seated in a stuffy conference room facing a bespectacled man named “Ronson.” Ronson wore a professional smile as he commenced a psychological evaluation. It was a requirement of Consolidated Rutile’s insurance carrier.

If Gawler was going to do the heavy work at the behest of CR, they, more specifically the insurance carrier, wanted to make sure that he was, putting it succinctly, hard-headed but not psychotic.

“I’m going to ask you a couple of basic questions,” Ronson said with a professional’s warmth. “Where did you grow up?”

“Melbourne,” Gawler grunted, not pleased in the slightest, feeling like a rat inside a box being poked and prodded.

“Your parents.”

“What about them?”

“Who are they?”

“My mother died tragically one Christmas day when I was sixteen. She choked on a chicken bone while were eating Christmas dinner. We rushed her to hospital, but they couldn’t save her, and she died that day. It was horrendous. My father was absolutely distraught. He collapsed with

heart failure while we were waiting for mum to be treated at the hospital and he died that same day.”

“Ah,” Ronson remarked as he pulled the notepad beside him in front of him and jotted a note.

Gawler eyed the notepad. “That’s interesting to you?”

Ronson shrugged. “I’m just making a note, Mister Gawler.”

“Then maybe you should make another note. My wife also died not long ago. Incurable cancer.”

Ronson frowned. “I was going to get to that, yes.”

This is pointless, Gawler thought. I’m not suicidal. I’m not deranged. I’m not going to put my hands on somebody who doesn’t have it coming. He crossed his arms defensively, leaning back in his chair with a groan. “You seem to know everything,” he said, “so you’ll have to excuse me if I think this is pointless.”

Ronson interlaced his fingers. “Consider this a formality, Mister Gawler. In the brief time we’ve been speaking and based on the glance I’ve had at your record; I’m inclined to think that you’ll pass this examination with flying colours.”

“*Inclined to think.*”

The examiner shrugged. “There could be some underlying factor I have yet to stumble across in your profile that would raise some red flags.” He picked up his pen and pressed it to the notepad. “Tell me about your childhood.”

“It was fairly benign,” Gawler said. “I had wonderful loving parents.”

“Who took you in after they died?”

“My uncle Donald and Aunt Jolene.”

“What was your relationship with him like?”

“He was a truly dreadful man. She was kind but demure.”

“Abusive?”

“My uncle was an alcoholic; he never raised his hand to me or my siblings. But he did kill my dog one night by belting it with a lump of wood because it messed with his chickens. What he did was utterly brutal. I never forgave him for that.”

Ronson took a note. “And what about—?”

The incessant inquiries had gotten under Gawler’s skin. “Look,” he cut in, “I had four siblings, who I don’t speak to anymore, my uncle raised us, I did well in school, and I played football for a spell before my ACL let me down.”

“How does that affect you physically?”

“Not very much now. Surgery corrected it well enough. And I have a high pain tolerance.”

Ronson said, “Let’s talk about your wife.”

Gawler said, “Let’s not.”

“She recently passed away.”

“She did. And no, I don’t have self-harming thoughts.”

“What thoughts trouble you as a result of her dying so suddenly?”

Many emotions plagued Gawler: Sadness, regret, confusion, irritation. There were so many things that tormented him these days.

“My wife’s death,” he said in a tired tone, “was deeply tragic. Yes, it pained me, and yes, I still deal with the memories of her.”

“Any vices?”

“You’re asking me if I drink heavily to deal with my trauma or take any drugs.”

The question made him feel like he was being pressed by a parent. “I don’t drink alcohol these days. I am strictly an orange juice man and drugs have never interested me. I’ve seen what they can do to people.”

Ronson made another note. “What about your siblings?” he asked.

“We don’t talk anymore.”

“You mentioned that.”

“Why?”

“Because of me.”

“How come?”

“Because I left them all behind when I moved away from home. My uncle. I couldn’t stand him. I was the oldest, my brothers and sisters’ sort of held that against me. When I came back during my university days to make amends, my youngest brother, Daniel, told me to leave. He said I had abandoned them.”

Ronson said, “You haven’t spoken to them since?”

Gawler said, “No.”

“If you could, would you?”

“Yes. But they don’t want to know me. And anyway, they are scattered now all around the world.

“Daniel was the only one who showed up at Sarah’s funeral. He squeezed my arm, nodded, and left when it was all over. I tried to call him a week later. I left a message. He never returned it.”

The examiner scribbled more notes. Gawler peered at

him like a hawk, curious as to what Ronson was jotting down but unable to make it out.

“Mister Gawler,” Ronson said, “if I told you that you were depressed, what would you say?”

“That you were probably correct.”

Ronson appeared bemused. “Most people would push back on that diagnosis.”

Gawler crossed his arms. “I’m not most people.”

“Well, I’m inclined to think that you are more self-aware than most people who are dealing with grief.”

Perching forward in his seat, Gawler’s eyelids became slits. Unblinking. Staring directly at Ronson. “Let’s cut the bull,” he said with a grumble. “Am I cleared, or am I not?”

Ronson said nothing as he scribbled more notes. He spent close to ten minutes more asking questions.

Gawler was not told of the examiner’s findings, but James was. He was advised that Gawler was a risk, but a manageable one. His current mental state brought him to the edge of being unhinged, but the relationship that James had with Gawler should serve to reel Gawler in when necessary.

“He’s a weapon,” Ronson advised James, “but *you* should be able to aim him in the right direction.”

Gawler awoke. Sweat clung to his shirt. He sat up in bed, shaking off the memory of Ronson. He slowed his breathing. He was still thinking of Sarah, still unable to say

her name out loud. Turning on the desk lamp, he swung his legs off the bed and held his head in his hands. For the first time in months, he opened his mouth, whispered the name “Sarah,” He felt a tear slide down his cheek.

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CHAPTER 8

Sleep evaded Gawler that night. He glanced at his watch. It was two AM. He was awake. Alert. Thinking about Sarah. Rather than dwelling on his memories, he decided to use his residual energy to do a little reconnaissance at the processing plant. He figured it was better to be distracted than depressed. *Ronson*, he thought, *would have a field day if he were here now.*

Slipping on his jeans, boots, a black t-shirt, and with a black bomber jacket stuffed into his bag, he headed downstairs, piled into his Humvee, and drove through the night to the plant. No one should be at the plant at this hour. It was at least five hours before the first person would show up. But Gawler listened to his gut, it was beckoning him to check out the plant. His senses called him to the scene like a crocodile picking up the scent of blood. Killing the headlamps, Gawler slipped his Humvee into a wooded area thick with shrubbery 20 metres off the road leading to the plant. The spot he chose was invisible to vehicles passing along the road. He shut off the engine and, lowered the window to allow the chill to filter into the car. The

silence was restful but somehow ominous. His mind started to wander again to thoughts of Sarah.

Close to twenty minutes passed while Gawler gazed steadfastly at the plant. He fixed his attention on the boom-gate which gave access to the plant. The night was utterly silent, but Gawler could sense the presence of movement from something not yet visible. He had to thank Uncle Donald for that one. He had taught the young Gawler how to wait, how to hide in the shadows, how to pick up the slightest sights and sounds and scents to track down the foxes they hunted. But Gawler hated guns and shooting animals. He had kept Donald company on those trips to keep the peace. Gawler didn't shed a single tear when he heard Donald had succumbed to a heart attack, but he remained thankful that the old man had taught him some valuable techniques which he still sometimes used.

Gawler eased the window down. *Someone's here*, his mind raced. *They're close by*. A minute later his suspicions were confirmed. He stiffened to attention the moment the boom-gate to the plant opened. He spotted none other than Limpy leaving the plant. He was dressed in black clothing and a dark baseball cap. He hustled toward the back of the plant. Fast but not eager. Quick but still relaxed in his stride.

"What are you up to, mate?" Gawler whispered, an eagerness settled over him as he saw a man, who shouldn't have been working for the company in the first place, stalking around the plant in the dead of night.

The sounds of an engine spluttering to life filled the night air. A pair of headlamps cut through the darkness. A

Ford Fiesta, its rusting dull brownish colour providing a functional camouflage, made a U-turn from the plant and headed up the road straight towards Gawler.

Gawler watched as the Fiesta flashed past his hiding spot. He made out Limpy's face in the shadows behind the wheel as the car powered away.

He waited until Limpy was a half-kilometre down the road before he started the Humvee. He kept his headlights off and tailed Limpy until they reached the main highway leading out of town.

Tracking at a safe distance Gawler followed as Limpy sped down the highway to an ugly industrial area about five kilometres outside the town's limits. The area was unlit. It was totally dark with industrial yards on each side of the road secured behind high wire steel link fences and guarded by growling dogs. The area seemed to be filled with car wrecking yards, second-hand junk depots and tired looking grubby little warehouses.

Limpy pulled into a carpark at an inconspicuous building set apart from the warehouses. It was showing some signs of occupation. A few cars and motorcycles were parked out front. Shadows were moving across the upstairs windows.

Gawler parked the Humvee a half block away. He had a clear view of the building. It was a double story establishment painted in black with faded purple fluorescent lights tracing the building's profile. A sign above the entrance read

“Spinners,” in a fading and crackling glow of neon cursive letters.

Gawler waited until Limpy had entered the building before making his way toward the building. Gawler walked down the centre of the road, keeping a clear distance from the fences on either side of the road. The dogs had picked up his scent and were snuffling, moving along the inside of the fences, pawing, and scrabbling at the wire. *“Just don’t bark you mongrels,”* he mused.

Gawler could not suppress a tight smile the moment he saw the voluptuous naked female bodies displayed on the posters flanking the double entrance doors. It was immediately obvious that he had arrived at a place which was ironically being promoted as a ‘gentlemen’s club.’ *There’s probably a brothel upstairs; there usually is,* he mused.

Gawler watched as Limpy casually strolled into the club without being accosted by the burly bouncer stationed at the door. He didn’t pause to pay the twenty-dollar entrance fee advertised on a placard next to the bouncer’s perch. *He is meeting someone,* Gawler thought as Limpy pushed the door open. Gawler thought *I’ve come this far; I should follow through and check the place out.*

CHAPTER 9

Gawler stuck his hands in his pockets, lowered his head and tried to assume the demeanour of a guy coming to a skin joint in the early morning hours to get away from a wife who had been withholding what he believed he was entitled to from her. He deliberately tried to create an impression of appearing perhaps a little nervous combined with some self-loathing as he made eye contact with the bouncer. Thrusting his chin forward, Gawler said, “Hey,” in a flat tone as he proceeded to fish out the necessary cover charge.

The bouncer, counting some notes in his hand, did not acknowledge Gawler. He was a heavy man. Big, with a tattooed balding head and rolls of flesh swelling his neck around its full circumference.

“It’s twenty, right?” Gawler said as he held out his cash.

The bouncer said nothing.

Great, Gawler told himself. *This one is going to make me work for it.* “Can I go in?” he asked.

The bouncer shook his head. “Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Club is closed.”

Gawler huffed. "I just saw someone go in."

"No, you didn't."

"I'm pretty sure I did."

The bouncer slowly lifted his head. Eyes like slits fixed on Gawler. "Go home. The club is closed."

The thumping of the bass inside the club was palpable. Gawler felt he could virtually taste the lingering scent of perspiring bodies. The bouncer had a good twenty kilos on him. Hands the size of baseball mitts. *This brute had probably tossed out his fair share of unruly patrons. From his experience of the types who usually visited this place he probably fingered me as just another shmuck who could be dealt with by a quick backhanded swipe. Fine with me.*

Gawler discarded his bashful persona, pocketed his money, stood tall, and sighed. "I'll tell you what. I'm going to try to do this the easy way. I'm going to give you double the price of admission. That's Option A."

The bouncer pocketed his tips, clasped his hands in front of him and raised his chin. His lips tightened. "And Option B?"

Gawler shrugged, took a step forward and stared at the bouncer's barstool footrest. "Option B is a pain in the arse."

"Is that a fact?"

"It is."

The bouncer snarled. "Let's go with Option C."

The bouncer focused his bleary eyes on Gawler's face and didn't notice as he stealthily spread his feet apart. Gawler said, "There is no Option C." He hooked his foot under the barstool and swiped it out from under the bouncer. The bouncer fell backwards smacking the

back of his head against the concrete pavement with the unhealthy crump of bone hitting concrete. Gawler stepped over the unconscious bouncer and moved to the club's entrance. Pursing his lips, Gawler muttered, "See? *Real pain in the arse.*"

Gawler pushed open the doors and was hit by the pungent odour of cheap liquor blended with perspiration and cigarette smoke. It washed over him like a nauseous wave. He winced and stepped into a hallway leading to the main floor. A Flash and the Pan song, "Ayla," was cranked at full volume. Clouds of cigarette smoke hung like a fog throughout the cramped establishment.

Gawler emerged from the hallway onto the main floor. Sporadic flashes of many coloured strobe lights illuminated the walls. The place was so dimly lit that his face was not clearly visible to the other patrons.

He examined his surroundings: *Bar to the left, he clocked, main stage past it. He glanced to his right. Three VIP booths. A hallway to the right of them. Bathrooms and a back office beyond that.* Gawler reckoned just shy of twenty bodies were in the club including the three pole dancers on stage. The patrons' eyes seemed glazed, fixed on the dancers in a way which made them appear demonic when hit by the strobe lights. The dancers were clearly weary, forcing themselves to gyrate like stunned heifers as they danced topless on the main stage. Gawler recognised the three dancers as the females he had observed at the gold processing plant during his tour who had been working so hard in the hot and dusty workplace. "*Tough life for them*", he mused. "*On the job day and night.*"

Gawler scanned the crowd. He spotted Limpy holding an intense conversation with an unmistakably Russian thug in the VIP booth. Turning his back, Gawler moved to the bar and continued to peripherally observe Limpy and the Russian.

The bartender, a blonde-haired haggard looking woman who seemed just as weary as the dancers, asked Gawler what he wanted. Gawler opted for orange juice.

She snarled. “We don’t serve orange juice here mate.”

When she opened her mouth, her appearance immediately went south. It looked as though she had borrowed her grandfather’s false teeth for the evening.

Gawler said, “Well, I’ll make it water then if you don’t mind”.

She returned with a glass of water and slapped it down in front of him. She took his five-dollar note.

Gawler noted that the water was warm. He took a mouthful, and instantly blurted, “Ugh.” He sprayed the water from his mouth over the haggard woman. It tastes like dishwashing water” he said. *Almost definitely is dishwashing water*, he mused. *“Smartarse. With her attitude she won’t last long in this job, or any other job for that matter.”*

The woman shouted down the hallway for the bouncer who had stumbled inside from his perch outside the door. He ignored her. He was preoccupied with his own issues of pain and suffering.

But Gawler wasn’t bothered with what he regarded as a minor annoyance. His focus was on Limpy speaking with the Russian who sported more than ample gold bling and an ugly neck tattoo. Gawler did not recognize the Ruskie’s

face. Limpy appeared to be listening closely to the Russian. His expression seemed to show a sullen, intimidated response to what the Russian was telling him. Limpy gesticulated with his good hand, obviously explaining something in great detail. After a long and laborious bout of explaining Limpy sat back. The Russian asked him something. Limpy answered it. The Russian offered up another question. Limpy gave him an answer. The Russian nodded before waving his hand dismissively at Limpy who promptly stood up and made his way to the exit.

“What are you up to, Limpy?” Gawler whispered to himself. He intended to follow Limpy when he left the club. While waiting for him to make a move to the exit, Gawler studied the face of the Russian and mentally filed it away. *Limpy’s in on this, he figured. Somehow, some way.*

Gawler had his fill of watching the weary looking naked poll dancers stumbling through their dance routine. Limpy disappeared into the shadowy hallway leading to the exit door and was forced to step to one side. The bouncer came stumbling past him in the opposite direction heading to the main floor. He looked dazed; with his eyes half closed and clutching a bloodied towel to the back of his head. Two gangsters, roughly his size were walking with him, one on either side.

Gawler was ready to leave the club. He stood from his spot at the bar, shoved his hands in his pockets, and moved towards the hallway leading to the exit.

The two hulking guys flanking the bouncer spread out as they entered the main floor.

The thug on the left, sporting a scrappy crop of greasy hair on his huge head, mumbled. “That him?”

The bouncer, mumbling groggily through clenched teeth, motioned with a bloody towel towards Gawler. “Yep. That’s the one.”

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CHAPTER 10

“Great,” Gawler thought as he moved towards the hallway. The three toughs were blocking his way out. He was confronting a truckload of meat and muscle. He guessed their predatory stares had probably evolved from a life of hard knocks fine-tuned at some gladiator academy better known as a penal establishment. Their jailhouse ink gave unsubtle hints to their history. He assumed they would be itching to turn him into their personal little hand puppet.

The thug on the right with the sleeves of his shirt cut off to show thick muscle covered in fat and tattoos, cracked his knuckles. His hands and arms were jerking with some sort of punch-drunk chronic condition. “You have just walked into the wrong club, buddy.”

Gawler was not amused. “You guys are more cliché than soap opera.”

The bouncer puffed his chest. “Legs or arms.”

“I’m more of a leg man, myself.”

Sleeveless cocked his head to the side. “He was asking which ones you want broken, you punk.”

“Ah,” Gawler squinted as he forced a patronizing smirk. “You should have been a little clearer on that.”

Scrappy Hair took a step forward. “I say we break them all.”

“Well,” sleeveless said, “we’re gonna be breaking something tonight.” He crooked a finger at Gawler. “You ever been to prison, mate?”

Putting some space between himself and the thugs, Gawler sensed the air around the club change. He could feel the eyes of the other patrons on him. He felt the tension as if the oxygen was being sucked out of the room. He glanced to his right at the bar where a pair of half-depleted schooners sat in front of a dozing customer. *Could come in useful*, he mused.

“No,” Gawler said. “I haven’t been to prison.”

Sleeveless and Scrappy closed in on Gawler.

The bouncer, still obviously feeling groggy retreated to the hallway. He stumbled back along the hallway towards his stool near the exit door. He stayed put, as if moving from his stool would require more effort than he could muster.

The two thugs were acting like the bouncer’s slavering prized canines, eager to tear Gawler apart. The house music changed to “Serpentine Fire,” by Earth, Wind, and Fire. Smiling, Gawler recalled hearing that song at a club when he took Sarah on one of their first dates, and thought, *I like that song*.

“I’m assuming,” Gawler said, “that you boys spent some time behind bars.”

Sleeveless and Scrappy were two metres away. Sleeveless on Gawler’s left, Scrappy on his right. Scrappy grunted at Gawler: “Spent more time there than you could imagine.”

Gawler said, "You know why you did?"

Sleeveless asked, "Why?"

The half-depleted schooners were now just an easy reach away to Gawler's left. Arms outstretched, he said, "Because you jackasses were dumb enough to get caught."

Sleeveless lunged with his right arm outstretched. Gawler caught the guy by the wrist, held on for a split second and then let go. The thug staggered, unbalanced, uncoordinated and ineffectual and ended with a late swing that missed Gawler entirely. He then aimed a second swing straight at Gawler which in Gawler's opinion took the entire innocent until proven guilty thing right off the table. Gawler stepped left and the flying fist buzzed right past his chin. The force behind the missed shot spun the guy outward and Gawler kicked his feet from under him. This move dumped him heavily face down on the floor.

The second thug started wading in, huge thighs, short choppy steps, fists like hams, moving like an angry bull in a rodeo ring. Gawler matched the guy's charge and moved towards him with his own momentum. He smashed his elbow horizontally into the space between the guy's mouth and his hairline. It would have felt like running full tilt into a steel fence railing. Game over except the other guy was back up on his knees and scrabbling on the floor for a grip, with his hands and knees bent like a sprinter on the blocks. Gawler kicked him hard in the side of his head. The guy's eyes rolled as his jaw became disconnected from its hinge. He toppled sideways and lay still with his legs folded under him.

Now the two guys lay together like black lumps on the floor.

“Jesus”, the weary blonde barmaid said as she retreated back down toward the far end of the bar.

Gawler said, “sorry about the mess.”

Looking across the club, Gawler could see that the Russian Limpy had been holding court with had departed. The rest of the patrons were either slumping in their seats or rapidly decamping from the club. He headed towards the hallway leading to the exit door.

The bouncer was at the end near the exit door leaning forward with both hands resting on his stool. He threw down his bloodied towel and moved towards Gawler. The guy was still woozy, slow and uncoordinated. As he walked past him, Gawler jabbed his elbow hard into the bouncer’s gut. The bouncer doubled up and retreated backwards. It had been a tough night. He had no fight left in him.

Gawler stepped out of the club into the still night air and walked calmly down the road to his parked Humvee. The weather had remained hot and humid.

Gawler felt a burning sensation in his hand. He looked down and noticed that he had cut his knuckles in the melee. It was not a deep cut and he decided he would not need professional care. He would use the cotton, needles and thread from the medical chest in the Humvee to stitch the cut himself.

CHAPTER 11

It was early. The sun was slowly rising but already it was hot and steamy. The monsoon had not yet arrived. He could see that people were affected by the humidity, noticeably grumpy and on edge. Gawler, with his hand stitched and bandaged, gave a tight smile as he recalled the events of the previous night. He reckoned it was about a fifty-fifty shot the thugs would seek him out for revenge. But that would not happen until they had recovered and until that time came, he would focus on finding out why Limpy had been meeting at the club with the Russian.

With two take-away coffees in his insulated cup holders, he drove his Humvee to the plant. The security guy at the plant entrance recognized him and waved him towards the boom gate. The gate opened as he drove towards it. He spotted Natasha waiting outside the administration building. She smiled and waved. *‘That smile, I love it’*, he mumbled. He drove up to her, killed the engine and piled out.

“Good morning Sam.” she called, glancing at his bandaged hand. “What happened?”

Holding up his hand, Gawler opened his mouth, shrugged, and said, “Long story.”

“I see. I’d like to hear it sometime when you are ready to talk. How can I help you today?”

“I came to see if you had any updates for me on the personnel files, and I brought coffee.” Her passed her the cup.

She sipped her coffee. It was still steaming hot.

“Thank you,” she said. “Hot. That is the way I like it. This was just the thing I needed at this hour.”

“And yes, I do have something for you,” she said. “The files are upstairs. I was going to fetch them for you and bring them by the pub later.”

“Outstanding,” Gawler said as he looked around.

Security seemed tight throughout the plant. The company was meticulous in keeping all gold secured throughout all processing systems. All personnel were checked into and out of the plant with bag searches, body tap-downs and high-grade metal detecting equipment. How any gold could be taken out of the plant was now the unknown factor weighing on his thinking.

Squinting, Gawler said, “You seemed to have beefed-up security somewhat.”

Natasha nodded. “Head office stipulated these new mandates this morning. I, uh, actually thought maybe you had something to do with that.”

“It’s just a precaution. I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

“I’m actually rather open to it.” Natasha appeared

concerned. Her brow furrowed. “It appears we’re having some issues with the thickening tank this morning.”

“What kind of issues?”

Natasha sighed. “I don’t want to throw out the word ‘tampering’ just yet, but it’s a bit dubious.”

One name floated through Gawler’s mind: *Limpy*. Gesturing toward the tank, Gawler said, “You mind showing me?” With her safety in mind, he settled on not telling her what had happened last night with Limpy at the nightclub or about his suspicions concerning him.

Natasha led Gawler on a tour to the west side of the plant towards the thickening tank. Gawler laid eyes on three drum barrels with walkways thrown together on top of the drums which looked like roughly built bridges. The thickener was located in the open air at a section of the plant adjacent to the main ore crushing and processing building. Gold bearing slurry was pumped from the building to the thickener which was a large open topped cylindrical tank about twenty metres in diameter. The tank was continually stirred by a large rotating sweeper arm pivoted from the centre of the tank.

“So,” Gawler said, “what appears to be the issue?”

Natasha gestured to the tank. “It keeps shutting down, for some reason. I have a few people working on trying to figure out what’s causing it. I assumed you know that the slurry being pumped to the thickener was created by immersing crushed ore containing gold into a mixture of fresh water and thickening chemicals.

“The thickener will separate the two main components of the slurry. The thick gold containing component of the

slurry should sink to the base of the thickener from where it would be pumped back to the processing building for further treatment. The other component of the slurry is clear liquid. It is supposed to contain no gold and is drained off through the overflow gutter. But those in the know understand that sandy particles of gold will fall out of the clear solution into the gutter during normal operations.

“The bulk of sandy particles of gold normally float as inclusions in the thick section of the slurry. But this golden sand is only a small part of the total gold load in the slurry. The remainder of the gold embedded in the slurry is released by additional treatment with chemicals in the next stage of the process.” Natasha sighed. “And this,” she said, “is where things are a little, well, odd.”

The top rim of the tank was fitted with a gutter through which the overflow of clear slurry was discharged to a drain. Sandy particles of gold which had fallen out of the slurry could usually be spotted in the gutter. This gutter now attracted Gawler’s attention: it seemed conspicuously clean.

“There’s no gold,” Gawler said.

Natasha nodded. “Exactly.”

Gawler noted Natasha’s body language. She seemed uncomfortable as he casually examined the gutter. But she stayed cool and smoothly steered him away from the area. Gawler played along with her cool demeanour, but he now had a hint on where to look later with some closer scrutiny. *Was that you, Limpy?* he asked himself.

Gawler said he wanted to make another visit to the thickener later in the day. Natasha calmly tried to divert

him from going there again. As they moved away, Natasha offered up hypotheticals on what could be causing the lack of gold in the gutter. Gawler spotted Limpy lurking by one of the tanks glaring at them. It seemed to be a warning look. Limpy clearly didn't want Natasha bringing Gawler into this area. For a moment, Gawler wondered whether word had gotten back to Limpy about the "mishap" in the club earlier that morning. Either way, the unspoken message being relayed was that Gawler was now entering dangerous territory.

Natasha said, "I'm sure there's an explanation. We just need to work on the problem a bit more to figure that out."

Still sensing Limpy's gaze on the back of his neck, Gawler said, "I'm positive there's a reasonable explanation," as he mentally pegged Limpy as his prime suspect.

CHAPTER 12

Gawler had waited for a night he decided would be suitable for his next move. He had spent some time dining at the pub with Natasha, and then begged-off saying he had some calls to make. What he needed was a close look at anything that might be happening at the thickener late at night. The night was dark with heavy clouds. The air was still, the moon lurking behind the clouds like an actor waiting the cue to step out onto the stage. Limpy, having returned once again after-hours to do only God knew what, was fiddling around near the thickener as Gawler watched from a distance.

Gawler parked the Humvee on high ground a good kilometre from the processing plant. He had a clear view of the thickener area. From the storage locker under the floor of the Humvee he retrieved a powerful “Swellpro” drone. This was one of Gawler’s basic and most essentials tools. He had equipped himself for a good long look at what was happening at night at the thickener.

This drone had been designed for fishing. It was said to be the only waterproof fishing drone engineered to deliver baits and long lines up to 1.6km from the anglers’ location.

This drone meant you didn't need a boat to get to the best coastal fishing spots. Shore-based anglers could extend their casting range and drop baits weighing up to two kilograms. Gawler mused, *the fish wouldn't stand a chance*—but Gawler was not looking for fish that night.

The night vision telescopic lens on the drone's video camera would provide him with a clear picture of the entire thickener site from his remote viewing spot. He flew the drone high and at a safe distance from the thickener. No noise could be heard at ground level from the drone.

There was movement at the thickener. Gawler could see on his video screen that Limpy was busy, and the drone was capturing clear vision of the one-armed man at the thickener. Gawler's suspicions were confirmed. Limpy had flooded the thickener's overflow gutter with slurry by overriding the thickener's automatic controller by switching it to manual.

Gawler zoomed for a closer view. Limpy had obviously shutoff the process defect alarm signalling system. Then he had dialled down the underflow valve and simultaneously reduced the supply of fresh water into the slurry mix. This flooded the thickener with thick gold bearing slurry. Gawler could see that the thick slurry mixture had then run into the overflow gutter around the top of the tank instead of into the underflow withdrawal pipe. Under normal operations this gold rich slurry should never flow into the overflow gutter.

Gawler had a flash of understanding. He could now understand the system Limpy was using to take the gold

product. And there didn't appear to be any security personnel around to notice what was going on.

Bingo, Gawler thought. Now he understood Limpy's system for gathering gold. As the gold rich slurry flowed through the thickener gutter, sandy gold particles would be dropping out of the slurry and accumulating along the base of the gutter. After operating the thickener in this mode for a few hours during the night and then setting the operation back to normal in the morning, all that remained for Limpy to do was to reap the golden harvest by vacuuming up the golden sand particles from the dry gutter.

It seemed to Gawler that the tentacles of the mob had extended deep into the operations of the processing plant. Limpy was clearly the key to access by the mob. It was now a simple question of how far outside the plant those tentacles reached.

Gawler now realized that a significant volume of valuable thick gold bearing slurry was being wasted and lost to the company through the rigged discharge of the thick slurry into the overflow gutter which was then discharged to waste. It was clear to Gawler that the plant's gold production was suffering for no gain even to the Russians. This was part of the answer to the company's questions regarding the declining gold production.

Gawler thought *“surely Limpy and his Russian masters should realise that they could not collect gold every night by skimming the thickener. If the company got an inkling of what was happening at night, they would quickly step up their surveillance.”* Gawler mused; *“The Russians should know they needed to keep it cool. They should let a few nights go by without any fiddling with the*

thickener. But they were greedy. They persisted with stealing the gold even though they realized that an alert would soon go out if it hadn't gone out already.

Everyone knew that Gawler was on the site for a safety inspection, but according to the phone call he had with James before pulling up to the plant, the Russians were starting to suspect he could be snooping on them.

Gawler mused. *"The Russians are chancers. They would be hoping that snooping was not what he was doing. This time they had taken one too many chances. Basically, Gawler acknowledged, he had caught them—but he had yet to locate the gold they had stolen.*

Gawler now realized that Limpy had liberated large quantities of gold which he had removed from the thickener. But Gawler didn't yet know if the gold had been removed from the plant. If it had been taken away from the plant, perhaps it had been moved to some staging area in the town. Gawler knew his priority would now be to work at finding an answer to these questions. Secondly, he would sort out the Russians. He would find a way to clear the plant of the pestilence they had become.

Another issue bothering Gawler was that activities of the Russian thieves had implications for the environment. Nasty chemicals were being dumped into the town's water catchments. This would soon be noticed. *But none of that is of concern to Limpy or the Russians. They are criminals. You win some, you lose some as far as they were concerned. Gawler thought, their attitude is easy come and easy go.*

CHAPTER 13

Gawler picked up Russian chatter on the AnOm messaging channel indicating that something big was on the agenda. He had returned to the pub to check the messages. Now he was curious. He stepped out of the pub and took a stroll down the main street to see if anything of interest was happening outside. His curiosity was rewarded. Bikers were drifting into town. They were cruising around on their thundering Harleys looking for something to eat and somewhere to camp. Some of them appeared to settle on eating at the Chinese restaurant and he saw others were pitching their small camp tents at the reserve on the edge of town. Counting the heads as he saw them, Gawler thought, *One Biker, two Bikers, three Bikers four. Where there is one, there is bound to be more.*

Gawler had heard something about the event that had brought the bikers to town. According to Clint the Bartender they were waiting for the arrival of a shipment from South America of cocaine. Gawler didn't expect the bikers to stay in town for long. They would collect what they had come for from the Russian traffickers and promptly move on. They would be in a hurry to make their deliveries and collect their payment.

The chatter Gawler had picked up on his AnOm gave him advance notice that the upcoming event of interest was the arrival of a bauxite ore carrier which was due to load at the Rio Tinto port not far down the coast. It was the Big Lilly, a Panamax 80,000-ton capacity bulk ore carrier. The loading of the bauxite onto the ship was not an event of interest to the Russians or the Bikers, what was of interest was the secret unloading of the narcotics hidden on the ship. Gawler was in the throes of working on a plan of how he would handle the situation when he received a call from Natasha. She told Gawler that she and Oleg wanted to talk with him. "As soon as possible," she said. *Progress*, Gawler thought as he chose a table in the pub's downstairs dining area for a subdued little gathering.

"Oleg," Natasha said, speaking to her brother like he was ten years old, "this is Sam, Sam Gawler."

Shaking Oleg's hand, Gawler smiled a welcome. "What would you like to eat?" he said. Oleg was tall and solidly built. He said no more than one or two words at a time. Gawler and Natasha followed Oleg's lead and ordered fish and chips. Gawler waited to hear what Natasha wanted to tell him. They finished eating and in hushed tones he pressed Natasha to tell him what was troubling her.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Can we speak somewhere with more privacy?"

Gawler paid the tab and guided Natasha and Oleg upstairs to his room. He left the balcony door open to allow the cool breeze to flow through. He crossed his arms, leaned back against a wall, and said, "You have something you want to tell me."

A troubled look passed over Natasha's face. "The Russians frighten me."

Gawler said, "They have a tenancy to do that to people. The gangster element at least."

Looking at her brother, Natasha nodded, and said, "Tell him, Oleg."

Oleg focused on the floor and took a step forward. "The Russians," he said in a trembling voice, "asked me to do something again."

Gawler furrowed his brow. "What did they ask you do?"

"They..." Oleg shook his head, waved Gawler off and turned away from him.

"Oleg," Gawler took a step forward, "I'm here to help."

"You can trust him, Oleg," Natasha added. "He's here to fix things."

It took Oleg a moment to rally. He settled and said that the Russian thugs had pressured him to secretly work for them again using his scuba diving skills.

"Gawler said, "Did they say why?"

Natasha shook her head. "He knows why, he's done it before. It's really scary, with the crocodiles and all. Oleg told me this only two hours ago. I waited to tell you because I was nervous." She drew a shaky breath. "And this was after Limpy spoke to me."

Interesting, Gawler thought. "What did our one-armed friend have to say?"

"Limpy implied," Natasha said, "that something bad would happen if Oleg didn't continue doing what they needed him for." She looked away, "Then he said that I would be working in that awful club of theirs if Oleg didn't comply."

Gawler tensed. It seemed that the heat he had applied recently, especially after the touch up just the other night in the club, had motivated Limpy, and whoever he was working with, to force their hand. *You don't threaten women*, he thought. *Not nice.*

Gawler forced a smile and said, "Don't you worry about Limpy. He's full of himself. He's just a pawn. He can't do a damn thing."

Natasha appeared relaxed by Gawler's reassurances. A small smile worked its way into the corners of her mouth. She said, "Thank you, Mister Gawler."

He said, "Natasha, please, call me Sam."

"Right," she whispered, still smiling. "Sam." She held up a finger. "Also, there's something else I need to show you." Reaching into her purse, Natasha produced a glass test tube, domed at one end with a rubber stopper at the open end with a string cord attached. She handed it to Gawler.

"What is this?" he asked.

"This," Natasha said, "was on the grounds when I was doing my checks earlier. Limpy had a friend stop by at lunch. A female friend. She was stumbling all over herself. She was, well, scantily dressed."

Gawler thought, *probably one of the strippers from the club?*

"I guessed," Natasha said, "she may have been drunk or stoned. She kept stumbling about. At one point, she tripped and dropped her bag. Limpy nearly lost his cool when it happened. He started yelling at her and rushed her from the lunchroom. Anyway, after she and Limpy left to do, whatever it was they were going to do, I found this tube."

Gawler, examining the tube, discovered that it contained minute particles of gold. “Well, I’ll be...”

“To be honest with you, Sam,” Natasha said with her eyes focused on the floor, “I’ve been keeping something from you.”

Gawler look at her curiously.

“The truth is I actually just told you a little story, I found that tube some time ago,” Natasha said. “I’ve been holding onto it. I wasn’t sure if I could trust you enough to tell you this information, but now I think I can.” She gestured to the tube. “I found that tube a couple of weeks ago before that experience I just told you with Limpy’s visitor. She wasn’t the first. Several of the stripper girls from that club work at the processing plant. I started watching, paying attention, seeing why they were spending time with Limpy. That’s when I discovered something was happening, right out in the open.”

Gawler listened as Natasha explained how each morning the girls would bring empty test tubes into the processing plant concealed within their bodies. Each night they would traffic them out of the plant with the tubes filled with gold sand and hidden inside their bodies. Limpy forced them to deliver the tubes to the drug running gang at a safe house away from the plant.

Natasha said the traffickers knew the metal detectors at the plant could not detect the concealed test tubes containing the gold. She said she understood this method of carrying the gold was safe from detection by the metal detectors. She had learned that certain metals, like gold and other metals used for quality jewellery will not set off metal

detectors because they are non-magnetic. She said, “this is why when passing through airport screening you don’t need to remove good-quality rings, necklaces, bracelets, and piercings if they’re made from silver, gold, or platinum. The strippers had proved that this method was safe to get gold out of the plant, they had been using it for months.

“I’m so sorry, Sam,” Natasha said, holding back tears. “I didn’t mean to keep this from you. I was just scared, both for me and Oleg.”

It was disconcerting that Natasha had been withholding this information from him. Nevertheless, he understood her reservations. Lives, specially hers and Oleg’s were at stake. “It’s okay, Natasha,” he said. “I understand. I just need you to be forthright with me.”

“I know,” she said with a nod. “I will. I don’t want to be stuck in the position I’m in right now, neither me nor Oleg. We want to be free of this.”

Gawler said, “This is the crux of why I’m here. Now, I need you tell me everything else you know, everything that you’ve been holding back. That’s the only way I can fix this. That’s the only way you and Oleg will ever be free of this turmoil.”

Natasha nodded. “Well, I believe you know well enough by now that Limpy works for the Russians.”

“I figured as much.”

“Well, like anyone else, he has a boss.”

“Who is his boss?”

“There’s a man,” Natasha said, a serious expression in her eye, “and he goes by the name ‘Weasel.’”

CHAPTER 14

Natasha began to explain to Gawler how Limpy was the guardian at the plant of the stolen gold sand until it had been trafficked out by the stripper girls, Limpy's mules. Limpy worked quietly alone in the laboratory and filled the test tubes with gold sand each day when nobody was around. "But the man," she said, "who pulls Limpy's string is this man named Weasel."

Pulling up a chair and gesturing for Oleg and Natasha to sit on the bed, Gawler said, "Tell me about him."

For the next few minutes, Natasha told Gawler the history of Weasel, a native of Great Britain who she had been told used to run guns in the Middle East during the 90's. She was unsure of his real name, but he was older, and though he stood just a mere, one hundred and fifty-six centimetres, he had a quiet but sinister way about him until he would suddenly start screaming and yelling and threatening to the point where everyone who crossed his path would slink away terrified. "Limpy does what Weasel tells him to do," she said. "He never questions him."

Gawler said, "When was the last time you saw him?"

"A few months ago," Natasha said. "I think he

communicates and pulls the strings from a distance, most of the time.”

Natasha then explained that Weasel seemed to be one of the ringleaders in the Russian drug trafficking operation. He was also the key to the gold stealing system at the plant. She had a vague idea of how Limpy was skimming the gold sand at the thickener. She knew he had devised the system for stealing the sand and that the overflow gutter on the thickener was the key to the operation. That was why it was a very touchy location to be seen going near.

She said she knew that the quantities of gold being delivered were now not enough for the Russians.” The drug traffickers are insatiable” she said. They were insisting that Natasha must become a mule and the strippers were working overtime. They were doing double deliveries by each day going home for lunch and trafficking the tubes of gold sand twice a day.

Gawler now realized that the drug dealers needed the gold to pay for the cocaine they were importing. And Oleg was integral to the importation.

“The only question,” Gawler said, “is what exactly the Russians want Oleg to do this time.”

“Limpy is playing his cards close to his chest,” Natasha said as she glanced at her brother, his head down, saying nothing.

“We need to find out,” Gawler said. “Did anyone follow you here?”

Natasha shook her head. “Not as far as I know. I made pretty sure.”

“We need to keep it that way.” Gawler said. “After my

little touch-up incident at the club the other night, they're probably starting to figure me out."

Natasha seemed concerned. She said, "What happened?"

"It's a long story." Gawler glanced at the cuts on his knuckles. "But the short of it is that I'm sure I pissed off a few of the local thugs who associate with our Russian friends. It's probably best you stay clear for a little while."

Natasha sounded fearful. "But Sam, I'm worried—"

Gawler held up his hand. "Nothing is going to happen to you. I'm going to keep a close eye on everything. We need to make sure we take the next steps carefully so that we don't arouse suspicion." *There's much to do*, he pondered. *First off, I need to figure out who this Weasel character is.*

Oleg said, gazing at Gawler. "I'm worried."

Gawler nodded. "Nothing is going to happen to you or your sister, I swear this on my own life. This is what I do for a living."

"I'm scared." Oleg looked away. "I don't want to do any diving jobs again for these Russians. This is crocodile territory, it's a crazy place to scuba dive."

"We're going to figure out something. I just need a little time to think it through. The important thing is that we get you two away from here. We'll need to communicate from a distance until I figure out our next steps. I don't want to draw the Russians in, at least not yet."

Natasha said, "What do you have in mind?"

As Gawler opened his mouth to reply he spotted a shadow sweeping across the balcony. He instantly realized that his plan to keep Oleg and Natasha out of the Russians' crosshairs had collapsed in the blink of an eye.

CHAPTER 15

Gawler wasted no time. In his experience being the first mover had often kept him alive. In a single step he leapt through the open door onto the balcony and crashed full-on into one of the Russian thugs, a thin but sinewy man with tattoos covering his body from knuckles to neck.

Gawler's shoulder hit the thug hard in his sternum. As the Russian gasped for air, Gawler's arm thumped into his throat, crushing his windpipe, causing a gurgling sound to escape from his mouth. The impact lifted the Russian off his feet. Aided by the momentum from the hit Gawler lifted him in a bear hug and swung him in a semi-circle before tossing him like a lump of firewood over the balcony rail.

The Russian landed onto the soft bank of the cove with a soundless thump. Gawler stepped across to look over the balcony with Natasha now at his side. They gazed wide-eyed in amazement as they realized the thump and splash of the body landing in the mud had disturbed a large crocodile lounging nearby.

The crocodile, millions of years of evolution on its side, rumbled rapidly towards the Russian who was blinking

and starting to regain consciousness. The Russian, looked across in horror at the crocodile. The colour drained from his face. He opened his mouth to scream, but the scream was cut short as the crocodile's jaws crunched over his head. The crocodile dragged him to the bank of the cove. Blood churned in the turbid water as they both vanished into the depths.

The entire encounter took about 30 seconds. Other than Natasha and Oleg there no witnesses. The Russian thugs would have no idea what had happened to their careless hitman. But Gawler was certain the thug would not have come alone. That wasn't how they worked. *Someone*, he thought, *will be not far behind the first guy.*

"Go," Gawler said to Natasha as he jerked his keys out of his pocket and passed them to her. "Head downstairs. My Humvee is there. Drive off with Oleg. Do a circle of the entire block. I'll meet you out front."

"But Sam—"

Grasping her by the shoulders, Gawler yelled, "Go. Now."

Gawler ran swiftly along the balcony towards the corner at the end near the stairs, arriving just as the second hitman rounded the corner.

Natasha screamed. Gawler barked for Oleg to clear her out of the way. Oleg shoved Natasha to the floor as the hitman pulled an unfamiliar looking Russian pistol out of his waistband and tried to aim at Gawler.

Gawler kicked the guy hard in the groin. In footballer's terms, Gawler would have described it as a torpedo punt to the family jewels. As the hitman threw his head back in pain, Gawler lowered his shoulders and threw himself

at the man. His crew cut thumped hard onto the man's nose, crushing it to a pulp. The Russian was stunned. He staggered towards Gawler.

Gawler caught the Russian with both arms as he fell towards him and pushed him against the timber handrailing running along the edge of the balcony. The timber railing had been attacked by wood borers several years ago, but the myriad tiny borer holes were not noticeable to the casual observer. A while ago the holes had been painted over by some diligent maintenance guy.

Under the impact of the heavy Russian, the timber railing crumbled like someone snapping dry toast. The guy encountered zero resistance and was despatched into space. He screamed on his short journey down to the edge of the cove where he landed face down in the soft mud. The mud filled his mouth stifling his screams. His arrival disturbed another crocodile resting on the bank. It rumbled to him, snapped its jaw around his left leg and dragged him away to deeper water.

Gawler mused, "*the crocodiles around here are having a notably bountiful day.*" The entire encounter went unnoticed by anyone, just like the other incident about a minute ago.

"Come on," Gawler said to Oleg. "Grab your sister and let's go."

Oleg helped Natasha to her feet. Gawler retrieved the car keys from her, scooped up the Russian pistol and checked its rounds.

They made it to the car park. Nobody was about. Gawler couldn't help but think, *Two Russians down but God only knows how many more to go.* "Get in," he said to Oleg.

“Quickly.” Oleg helped a dazed and trembling Natasha into the Humvee. Gawler slid behind the wheel, cranked the engine, threw the car into drive, and decamped from the car park. He made a U-turn and barrelled off into the night. Although he was comforted with the knowledge that they had departed from the pub intact and unharmed, Gawler felt in the pit of his stomach that the demise of the two Russian thugs would be avenged sooner rather than later.

With no fixed destination in mind, Gawler headed the Humvee away from the town centre. Oleg was soon zonked out in the back seat. Natasha yawned and shifted her weight on the car seat, wincing, with some discomfort.

“You can ball up my jacket to rest your head on,” Gawler said.

Natasha shook her head. “No, I don’t think I can sleep. I can never fall asleep in moving vehicles.” She looked in the rear view. “Oleg, on the other hand, seems to fall asleep wherever he wants.”

He checked for a tail. The road behind them was clear. Outside it was blacker than a puddle of oil, only the headlamps and the sea of stars in the night sky provided any light. “We need somewhere to stay for the night,” he said. “Some regular place, clean, comfortable, familiar.”

A brightly lit hamburger joint loomed ahead out of nowhere.

“We all seriously need coffee,” Natasha said. Let’s make a quick stop-off here. We can wind down over a hot coffee and work out where to go next. I know of a very nice place where we can stay which I suggest we think about.

From the outside there didn't seem to be much action happening inside the hamburger joint. Just a bunch of motorbikes on the forecourt, nobody wandering around outside and a small group of patrons inside.

g u t t e r

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CHAPTER 16

The hamburger joint was an instant disappointment. It looked grubby: the floors were spotted with grease and unmentionable grime. An aroma of cheap liquor and rancid kitchen oil washed over them as they stepped through the door. Gawler felt as if he had been slapped in the face with the sort of stink that only a low dive could produce. Three men were talking softly at the bench on the left. There was a series of booths. to the right.

A bunch of guys dressed in leather jackets and jeans sat in one of the booths lounging, noisily eating burgers. They were big. Their skins were gnarled, wrinkled, weathered. They sported bushy unkempt beards and ugly moustaches. The patches stitched into their backs read “Coffin Cheaters.” Beside each man was a woman, each one wearing her own leather gear. One of the women appeared noticeably weary, worn-down, at her wit’s end.

“Oh, no,” Natasha whispered into Gawler’s ear.

“What is it?”

“I recognize some of these men,” she said. They’re with a gang of bikers who hang out in Buckleboo Creek from time to time. They call themselves the ‘Coffin Cheaters.’

They move drugs, guns, money, and everything else in-between.”

“Do you think they are going to be a problem for us right now?”

Natasha shook her head. “Not if we keep to ourselves.”

Gesturing towards an open booth close to the door, Gawler said “We can park ourselves here, I’ll fetch the coffees. He returned with three steaming mugs and said. “That gorgeous young redheaded Barista serving the coffee is the only good thing this place has got going for it.” *Well of course you would notice that Gawler, Natasha thought.*

He slipped into the booth and moved the gun from the back of his pants to his lap.

“So,” Natasha said after taking a sip of the hot java, “I want to suggest a place for us to sleep tonight.”

Gawler said, “Great, it sounds as though you might have a solution for us. There is still a long night ahead.”

Natasha said, “We could go to the bowls club. I am a member. I can sign you both in as my guests. The club has just been renovated. It has really nice well-equipped facilities. It has a good modern dining area and a separate accommodation wing; the rooms are better fitted out than any other place around here. No Russians will be coming near the place. They were banned a long time ago for unruly drunken behaviour. This club is unusual for Buckleboo Creek. It is modern and clean. It has several rooms for guest accommodation.” She said, “the club has a well-equipped kitchen with a separate bar, which for a change around here is rather sedate.” Gawler said, “That

sounds like the perfect place for us tonight. Let's finish our coffee and hit the road again.

"We need to stay low for the night. I need some quiet time to check my AnOm. I need to catch up with the Russians' latest plans. We must let the dust settle. The Russians are probably scrambling right now since I helped two of their men move on to their promised land. Doubtless they will eventually begin looking for us."

He tilted his mug towards her. "And I think it is obvious that you won't be making an appearance at the gold plant in the morning."

Oleg said, "I have arranged a day off work for tomorrow. The appointment I told you about for the job I must do for the Russians cannot be delayed for any reason. They have instructed me to turn up with my scuba gear and they told me that if I don't meet them on time, I can consider myself to be a dead man walking."

"They have a very nice way of putting things," Gawler said. "I hope the crocodiles will be sleeping it off in some quiet lagoon tomorrow."

Oleg growled. "Don't make fun of me Sam. This is all about my safety; in fact it is my life we are talking about here. Right now, I feel like a sitting duck in hunting season."

Natasha sighed and tried to change the subject and settle the men. They quietly drank their coffees. The caffeine jolted Gawler's senses into higher gear. He felt a second wind, he checked his watch and decided it was time to make a move. *We need to move cautiously*, he told himself. *Natasha is right. We've stirred up a hornet's nest.* But for him,

that was not such a bad thing. His job, his role, was to rub out certain troublesome pestilences.

“You *slag!*” one of the biker’s yelled.

Gawler’s hand felt for the gun on his lap. He glanced towards the bikers and saw a big thuggish man with a beard streaked with grey standing up and wrangling the woman beside him like a ragdoll.

“Johnny,” the woman said, eyes wide, her breathing strained, “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to—”

Another biker named Freddy grabbed the woman by her arms and pulled her in close. “You spilled beer all over my jeans, you *bitch!* What’s wrong with you? Where’s your brain?”

“Johnny—”

The biker named Johnny slapped the woman hard across the face. She fell to the floor. Gawler thought about doing something, but the last thing he needed tonight was to get into another punch-up.

“Sam,” Natasha whispered. “We can’t just sit here and watch him smack her around like that.”

“Easy,” Gawler murmured. “We don’t want to step into more trouble tonight.”

They watched as the woman lay curled up on the floor. The biker named Johnny stood over her, cracking his knuckles, flaring his nostrils. “I’m sick of your shit, woman,” he growled. “Get up. Now.”

The woman held up her arms defensively, tears welled in her eyes; “Please, Johnny. Not again.”

“I *said,*” Johnny growled as he tried to violently pull the woman to her feet, “get up!”

Gawler looked around the hamburger joint. No one, not the other bikers, the patrons, or even the burley young burger cook attempted to look or even glance in the direction of the commotion. They seemed scared or maybe too jaded by the sight of a biker beating up on his woman. *Damn it, he seethed. I wish one of Johnny's gangster mates would step in to put a stop to this. Maybe they are scared of saying anything to this idiot.*

Johnny squeezed the woman's face in his meaty palm before gripping her by the neck. "You need to learn a lesson," he taunted. "We're going outside."

"Please," the woman pleaded breathlessly. "Don't hurt me again."

Johnny snarled. "Well, it's going to hurt worse *this* time. You're not going to walk right for a week."

A couple of the bikers laughed self-consciously; their women looked worried, they sat silently watching. Gawler could imagine what Johnny was going to do to his lady. A rush of anger came over him. Now he felt he had no option. He was impelled to put a stop to Johnny before things degenerated further. He slid the gun into the back of his pants, stood up, and stepped into the centre of the room like a cowboy ready for a showdown at high noon.

Gawler stood tall, silent, motionless. The bikers all looked in his direction. A palpable air of tension had rapidly changed the atmosphere. Johnny released his grip from the woman's neck, dropped her to the floor, and formed his hands into fists. He levelled a cold gaze at Gawler. "You got a problem, knucklehead?"

Gawler nodded. "Yeah," Gawler coolly replied. "*You.*"

Johnny snarled and took a step forward. Gawler had not moved from his spot in the centre of the room. Johnny grunted, "I'm guessing you're too stupid to know that you don't shoot your mouth off in this place."

"And I'm going to guess," Gawler said, still not moving from his spot, "that you wankers get-off by beating up your women because it makes you feel better about your problem," he gestured to Johnny's crotch, "not much good as a knob jockey."

Johnny's complexion turned crimson. The vein in his forehead pulsed. He spread his legs as two of the other bikers slid out from their booth and stood on either side of him.

"You just stuffed up big time," Johnny grumbled. "*Big time*. But I'll give you a choice. I either fix you up right now or you get on your way out of here pronto. Which is it going to be?"

Gawler shrugged. "Nice of you to let me decide." He glanced at a clock on the wall. "It's getting late, it's probably close to your bed-time you crotch rocket."

Johnny rushed Gawler. He raised a fist. Gawler stood his ground. Johnny was just a few beats from throwing a punch. Gawler drew his gun, pointed it at Johnny's foot and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

"Goddamned dud Russian gun" Gawler exclaimed. With his arm outstretched he pitched the gun in a fast-bowling cricketer's full toss. It flew out of his hand at 135 km per hour hitting Johnny in the temple with a sickening crunch of crumbling bone. He fell to the floor, howling, clutching at his head, then he became still and silent. One

of the bikers behind Johnny reached for something from the back of his jeans. Gawler grabbed the man's hand in an iron grip causing him to drop a gun to the floor. Gawler kicked the gun trying to send it towards the door.

The tip of his boot snagged the gun's trigger. A deafening shot resonated through the burger joint. Everyone in the room ducked their heads for cover as a flat nosed slug smashed a jagged hole in the cappuccino machine causing a torrential spray of steam and boiling water to spew over the biker who had just dropped the gun. The scalded biker fell to his knees. His compatriot folded and held up his hands in submission.

The entire ordeal from start to finish lasted a crisp three seconds.

Gawler said to the barely conscious Johnny who lay prone on the floor. "That is a nasty looking indentation in your skull. Those sorts of injuries can be unpleasant. You might need to get it looked at."

"Now," he said, "are we finished?"

The biker's woman was still on the floor crying. She jumped up and ran to Gawler and took cover behind him. Natasha and Oleg slid out of the booth and stood behind the woman as the remaining still standing bikers rapidly retreated toward the back of the room.

"Natasha," Gawler said, "Could you please get the car started. "The woman behind him gripped Gawler's arm. "Take me with you. *Please.* "As they left the building Gawler called to the glamorous Barista;" Sorry about the mess."

Gawler was disappointed at the way events at the burger joint had turned out. He knew that he had no choice but

to take the woman with him. There was no way he could leave her behind with the Coffin Cheaters. He nodded towards the door. The biker's woman joined Natasha and Oleg as they left and piled into the Humvee. Gawler fished a twenty note from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. He stooped and picked up the biker's gun before stepping out the door. He mused *Why do I always seem to be saying 'sorry about the mess' to people.*

As soon as he was outside, he tossed the gun in a wide arc over a brick fence into a duck pond on the other side. They heard a couple of ducks let out a squawk. "*I hate guns,*" he muttered to himself. Then a bunch of ducks commenced a cacophony of squawking to serenade them on their way.

Natasha was behind the wheel. Oleg and the biker woman were in the back seat. Gawler climbed into the passenger's side. He said, "Floor it, Natasha," Let's head to that Bowls Club you spoke about." He sighed, "*I don't know why so many people are carrying guns, they never work properly when you need them. I don't carry one. Who needs them? I have always managed without one*".

For a while they drove in silence. The woman in the back, dabbing at her red and swollen eyes. She leaned forward, and said to Gawler, "Thank you mister. Johnny was going to kill me." She looked at her leather jacket and ripped it off as though it was contaminated. She rolled the window and tossed it out, resting back in her seat as she closed her eyes.

Gawler said, "Do you have somewhere to stay?" He noticed the tattoo on her arm that read "Property of Johnny Hinchliff."

“I’ll figured it out,” the woman said. “I can make my own way. I just need a ride back to Buckleboo Creek. I can work it out from there.”

“What’s your name?”

“Roxanne,” the woman said. “But I go by Roxy.”

“Well,” Gawler said, “everything’s okay now, Roxy. Just make sure you get as far away from this place as possible as soon as you can. We are going to the bowls club now to stay the night. I think it best if you come with us and you can work out somewhere to go in the morning.

“Believe me, I will. I’m just disappointed that you didn’t shoot Johnny.”

“I almost did that, but the gun was a dud. Typical Russian rubbish. But he’ll be sore in the head for a long time. It’s the least he deserves.”

“They’ll come looking for me,” Roxy said. “They’ll come looking for you, too. Johnny and his friends are connected. A few of the other biker gangs have alliances with them.”

Gawler frowned. “Like whom?”

“The Mongols. The One-Percenter. They had a war going for a while.” Roxy stared out the window. “That was when I met Johnny. It was two years ago. I had been thrown out of home, had nowhere to go and just started hitchhiking. I just needed a place to stay for a while. I fell in with a rough crowd at a biker pub. It only took a week before Johnny claimed me as his property and inked my arm to make it official. I’ve been stuck with him ever since. I’ve been trying to get out since I got in. I suppose I have you to thank for that.”

Gawler asked, “Why did the Coffin Cheaters join with the other gangs?”

Roxy shrugged. “I only know bits and pieces. What I *do* know is that it has something to do with some Russians. Johnny and his buddies have been moving their product: guns, drugs, money. They’re basically the mules chauffeuring their product if you want to think of it like that.”

Russians, Gawler thought as he noticed a glint in Natasha’s eye. “I’m curious,” he said to Roxy as he looked at her in the rear-view mirror. “Johnny and his gang, the Coffin Cheaters. You said that they work with the other gangs transporting product for the Russians.”

With a nod, Roxy said, “The Russian’s pay them top-dollar.”

“Then tell me,” Gawler said, “have you seen Johnny or his friends transporting anything, well, unusual.”

“Well,” Roxy said as she narrowed her eyes, “recently, they started moving gold. Something about a processing mill or whatever, where they were getting it from. They’ve been keeping it in a safe house for the Russians.”

Gawler turned to Natasha. They exchanged knowing looks. Another piece of the puzzle slid delicately into place.

CHAPTER 17

A comfortable looking older guy welcomed them to the bowls club. He smiled when he recognised Natasha. “Hi George,” she said. “Sorry about the late hour.” Her obvious friendship with George simplified the checking-in procedure. No awkward questions. George asked, “any baggage?” Natasha replied, “No, all we have is what we are standing in. There’s been a bit of a hiccup with our stuff.” He gave each of them a key to a room.

“Just walk down that corridor on the right. It looks out onto the bowling greens and past that there is a great view out across Albatross Bay,” he said. “If you need anything, I’ll be on duty here for another hour.”

Natasha asked Gawler and Oleg to come with her to her room while she settled in. “Nothing to unpack, strange isn’t it”. She said she wanted to chat while they wound down from their tumultuous day. Gawler and Natasha were relaxed and comfortable in each other’s company as they sat closely together on the couch in her room.

Gawler said, “I can’t stay long. I really need to catch up on any messages on my AnOm. I need to know what is happening with the Russians. They have lined up Oleg for

something tomorrow and it could be quite nasty.” Natasha turned to face Gawler. “At last, we have a little time to get to know more about each other. I just want for us to talk.”

“What would you like to talk about?”

“Well, I seem to know more about you than you do about me.”

Gawler shrugged. “My life’s story is not all that interesting.”

“I doubt that very much. Are you...are you married?”

Gawler’s stomach twisted in a knot. “I was once,” he said.

Frowning, Natasha said, “But not anymore?”

Sighing, Gawler said, “No, not anymore.”

“Can I ask what happened?”

He grew tense. He found it difficult to think about Sarah, let alone to talk about her.

“She died,” he said. “Cancer.”

Natasha covered her mouth with her hand. “My God. I’m so sorry.”

Gawler painfully recalled his memory of the tortuous hours and days he had spent with Sarah in the hospital as her life drained away. It had been ghastly for him to be forced to watch his once vibrant, loving partner lose her grip on life. Tears welled in his eyes, but he couldn’t speak.

Reaching over, Natasha gripped Gawler’s arm. Her touch was warm, delicate, caring. “I can only imagine what that’s like, losing someone that you love. I can’t even begin to think of what that must feel like.”

Grimacing with his mouth tight and, barely open,

Gawler said, "It stays with you," he said. "You just try your best to deal with it. It's like a sickness you must live with."

Withdrawing her hand, Natasha nestled back in her spot on the couch. "I'm scared," she said. "I'm scared of everything that's going on. We've stirred up something." She glanced towards Oleg.

With his jaw tensing, Gawler shook his head. "I'm not going to let anything happen to either of you, Natasha. I promise."

She said. "We were starting to talk about you Sam," about your life."

"Where do you live?" She asked

"Nowhere permanent," he said.

"I own an apartment high up in the Eureka Tower at Southbank in Melbourne. It was rundown when I bought it. I got a good deal. I stripped it out completely and did a complete renovation which turned into a fabulous place to come home to." Gawler shrugged. "But I rarely get to go come home there. I am always on the move. Mining company offices in many big cities across the world and mine sites in Africa and remote sites in Australia, Brazil, India China, USA, India, Indonesia. You name it."

Gawler drew a breath. "The apartment," he continued, "has floor to ceiling windows with fabulous one hundred-and eighty-degree panoramic views from the East to catch the morning sun and across Port Phillip Bay to the South and later in the day Westwards to catch the sunsets."

He explained that he had learned some time ago that his natural inclination was to be a trouble shooter. He became a freelance fixer, a gun for hire, working in the

dark world of undercover corporate fixing. He told her how he travelled to hot spots of corporate crime and corruption around the world. But he said that as far as his sponsors were concerned, he was anonymous. If they were challenged about something he was alleged to have done, they would claim they didn't know him. And now he had been assigned to Buckleboo Creek. He told her he was determined he fix things his way.

"And your family, Sam," Natasha said. "What about them?"

Gawler said, "I see my four brothers and sisters whenever we can get together all in one place. But that doesn't happen often because they are scattered across the world."

CHAPTER 18

Next morning over an early breakfast Natasha said to Gawler, “Those bikers we tangled with last night” she said, “they are truly ghastly people.

“I had a good long talk with Roxy last night. She came to my room after you and Oleg had gone. She wanted badly to talk to someone. She told me just how evil those guys are.

“She explained that the bikers claim ‘ownership’ over their wives and girlfriends who can never become gang members themselves. Some of the women are even branded like dogs, I know you saw Roxy’s tattoo.

Natasha said, “Roxy even told me that one girlfriend of a Life and Death gang member wears a jacket reading: ‘Property of Steve.’”

“I gather that women are generally treated as secondary to the organisation, members and motorcycles. “That girlfriend of Roxy’s, she said in her case she was ‘property’ of a club member. She had hooked up with him, a stranger on a bike. She lived the life with him for a few weeks until she got dropped off at a truck stop when he decided he had

had enough. He told her to return home or take off with some other stranger.”

Natasha said that Roxy had told her there is a hierarchy among the bikie women, with an ‘Old Lady’—a wife—at the top and strict rules on when a woman can be courted after finishing a relationship with a gang member and ceasing to be ‘off limits’.

“Biker women” Roxy had said, “are very much second-class citizens in that life. These biker clubs are not democratic organizations, ruled by the many for the good of them all. They are run very firmly by men who had usually clawed their way to the top of this primal food chain, and considering the general savagery of the ordinary member, that’s impressive.” She huffed.

Roxy had said, “When your ol’ man takes you places with him or when he has company at home, you can’t talk too much. Try to be friendly and polite but never, ever just jump right into the middle of their conversation. If there’s anything a good man can’t stand, it’s a woman who talks too damn much.”

Roxy then explained to Natasha that women must be outwardly submissive, be thick-skinned about sexist attitudes, and be able to get along reasonably well with the other women. She said to Natasha, “I resented the assumption that my vagina automatically rendered my intellect inferior to a person with a penis and a three-piece patch.”

“The Mongols club was known for torture, murder, drugs, guns, explosives.” She said. “Their reputation for violence and criminality is well deserved. “Don’t believe,”

Roxy said, “all the PR they might say about how they’re just men who love their bikes and have a fight now and again but collect toys for kids at Christmas. But in fact, they are criminals. They are one per centres. They deal in methamphetamines, and also to a lesser extent ecstasy and cannabis. They are into extortion big time, and fraud and are always hanging out in places that are on the knife edge of criminality, like strip clubs.”

“So, “who are the Mongols and what are their rules,” Natasha asked?

Roxy said,” They are also called the Mongol Nation or Mongol Brotherhood. Their name comes from the vast 12th century empire formed by the Asian warlord said to have killed more people than anyone else in history, Genghis Khan. The Mongols wear the three-piece patch which is central to the outlaw gang ethos and jealously guarded, to the extent gangs will attack non-outlaw bike groups who dare to wear the three-piece, which consists of the ‘top rocker’ with the club’s name, ‘bottom rocker’ with the club chapter location and the central club emblem. ‘Respect Few, Fear None’ is the Mongols’ byword.

They have established a widespread and fearless criminal enterprise through which they enforce their core business: drug dealing, money laundering, robbery and in particular motorcycle theft, extortion, firearms violations, and murder. Their allies among other outlaw bikie gangs include the Sons of Silence, the Outlaws, the Bandidos and the Finks, who share their deadly rivalry with the Hells Angels.”

CHAPTER 19

They had finished eating breakfast. Gawler studied the scene through the dining room window which looked out over the sparkling waters of Albatross Bay. Across the glimmering expanse he could see that the bulk ore bauxite carrier Big Lilly was about to drop anchor about a kilometre offshore. He knew the ship would be waiting for official clearance for port entry and for the tug cable to be attached. Time was short for what the Russian drug smugglers needed to do.

Gawler looked at Oleg and said, “We need to make a plan right now for how to deal with that job the Russians have for you today. We need you to be strong. Just do as I say.” He glanced at Natasha. “If both of you follow my lead, we’ll be through the woods before the end of this day.”

“Okay,” Natasha said sitting bolt upright with her head held high. “What do you have in mind?” Gawler said. “Let’s plan our day.” The three of them put their heads together and talked through their options until they came up with what they thought could be a workable plan. They

then hurried out of the bowls club to set the plan into effect.

Three people were speeding towards the Big Lilly in a rubber duckie. Two of them were Russian mobsters and the other was Oleg who was fitted out in his scuba diving outfit. Gawler was not far away. His drone was hovering above the rubber duckie as he watched the mobsters' every move on his video screen.

Gawler thought the mobster's use of this Rescue Boat was a clever move. They are rubber boats with an outboard motor used in surf lifesaving. They are used for patrolling ocean surf beaches where the surf is too powerful to operate land-based rescues. Duckies are equipped with a 30hp outboard 4-Stroke motor, with a Prop Deflector fitted to protect swimmers and the engine from rocks. They can reach a top speed of 30 knots.

Oleg had told Gawler that the mobsters' target was the sea chest on the Big Lilly, a metallic inlet below the water line. This inlet is used as the supply point the ship uses to draw its engine cooling water.

Gawler watched his video as the Duckie reached the side of the ship. Now Oleg had to do the job the mobsters needed him for. He dived overboard and felt his way along the barnacled serrations on Big Lilly's hull. He located the sea chest and reached inside. He found what the mobsters needed him to retrieve. A long thick black bag trussed with black and white striped nautical rope. The sack was heavy

and shaped like a body bag. It could well have contained one. Oleg connected a rope from the Duckie to the bag and signalled to the mobsters to haul it in—then he disappeared under the water.

Gawler had zoomed in on the scene. He had clear vision on his video screen and could see that the mobsters were busy. They had to haul the heavy bag onto the Duckie. It was then that they noticed Oleg was nowhere to be seen. He had not surfaced. Gawler could understand that the Russians had a dilemma. Should they try to find Oleg and how could they do that, or should they deliver the contraband to the heavies on shore who were clearly getting impatient.

These guys were obviously not decision makers. They chose the easiest option. They left Oleg to his fate. If necessary, he would be replaceable. Gawler watched the events on the water being videoed from his drone.

On the other side of Big Lilly, Oleg rose to the surface. He had swum underneath the ship. He now commenced to swim as fast as he could manage towards the tug which was connecting a cable to Big Lilly. Oleg was swimming hard, and it wasn't easy with his scuba gear weighing him down. He reached the tug before it started to move. He came alongside and called to the seamen on board. He asked them to help him climb aboard. As he and Natasha and Gawler had planned, he was making his escape from the Russian mobsters.

When the tug reached the dock, Gawler watched as Oleg disembarked. Oleg thanked the seamen operating the tug for the ride. He left his scuba gear on board the tug.

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He told them he would catch up with them later and said to them, *“I’ll get my gear next time I see you.”*

He was dressed in shorts and tee shirt as he ran along the dock. Natasha was waiting for him in Gawler’s Humvee parked on the road at the end of the dock.

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CHAPTER 20

Natasha and Oleg sped away, in the Humvee - heading towards Venus Bay, the nearest town from Buckleboo Creek. The road to Venus Bay was topped with bitumen but only up to the town edge of Buckleboo Creek. After that it was a potholed rutted and ridged dirt track. Natasha was driving the Humvee as hard as she could push it. She was crunching a path forward at a rate only a hotted Humvee could handle.

“Easy,” Natasha told herself. “Just take it easy.”

It was going to be a very rough ride. In the rear-view mirror Natasha could see a black Mercedes limousine following them out of town. It was trying to narrow the gap between them. Apparently, the mobsters’ tentacles had the port covered. It seemed they had figured what had happened to Oleg. But a Mercedes was no match for a Humvee on this rugged track. Its suspension would disintegrate long before the Humvee had a problem.

The Humvee was kicking up clouds of dust choking the Russians in the pursuing Mercedes and making it difficult for the driver to see the road ahead.

Hovering above the Mercedes Gawler's Fishers drone was keeping pace and staying level with the Mercedes at about five metres above its open sunroof. In place of fishing bait, the drone was fitted with a hand grenade. The Russians in the Mercedes were not looking upwards, they were peering straight ahead through the clouds of dust kicked up by the Humvee. They did not see Gawler's drone. *Slow and steady*, Gawler thought. *Slow and steady*.

He knew had only a small window of time to act before the Mercedes would drive out of range of his drone's wireless controls. He activated the spring-loaded trigger on the drone which withdrew the hand grenade's pin.

He counted to three and released the grenade from the drone. The grenade fell cleanly through the open sunroof of the Mercedes. The Russians in the car had no time to act. They were being tossed around on the rough road like corks on the ocean. They were coughing and choking from the dust they were eating.

They didn't see the grenade as it landed beside the front seat. At the count of ten the grenade exploded sending the Mercedes and its occupants skywards in a shower of metal and body parts. The car then burst into flames destroying whatever was left.

Gawler tensed and steered the drone back to his hiding spot at the cove. He felt that he had done something that would trouble his dreams for a long time. He had just killed three men in cold blood. It was partly self-defence, or more correctly defence of Natasha and Oleg. The Gangsters didn't see it coming. The explosion had been so sudden that they wouldn't have suffered. He had just ridden the

world of some dangerous pests. But he was not a natural killer. It was something that he had been forced to do by circumstances and he knew he would have to live with that knowledge for a long time to come.

Natasha slowed the Humvee, and they cruised the rest of the way along the track to Venus Bay. It was a journey of 264 kilometres and would take them three and half hours. It would be an exhausting, rough and dusty very long road trip. She had packed a change of clothes for Oleg. He changed into them as they drove.

It was going to be a long and tedious drive for Natasha. She would have time to do a lot of thinking. In the first place she hadn't relished the idea of coming to Buckleboo Creek, but she had wanted to get away from a sleazy music teacher back in Melbourne who was pressuring her for sex. This had seriously troubled her, so she took the opportunity to come to this hick town with Oleg.

She gave up a boyfriend she had been regularly seeing back home. She was disheartened, but she had not been fully committed to him either. A bit of a mummy's boy. Now she was caught up with the Russian thugs and couldn't see a way out. She hoped Gawler might be the way out. She was also wary of him. She was drawn to him but did not want things to go too far too soon. She wondered, *could she control her urges and hold back with him?*"

Natasha thought about her life in the family as she grew into her teens and became a schoolgirl. About how

her mother had gradually succumbed to dementia to the point where she didn't recognise Natasha anymore. How it was heart breaking to see her mother decline in that way. She sat for months beside her mother in the hospital as she slowly faded from a warm living person to a vegetable and to eventually pass away before her eyes.

As she wrestled the Humvee down the rugged track Natasha distracted herself from the tedium of the rough journey. She thought maybe she could help Gawler devise a strategy to cause a wedge between the Russians and the Bikers. She planned to talk with him about this idea as soon as the opportunity arose.

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CHAPTER 21

They arrived at the Venus Bay airstrip as the sun was setting. Gawler had activated his contacts in London. A private helicopter was waiting for Oleg. It had been contracted to take him to Cairns where an airline booking had been made with Qantas for him on a flight to Melbourne. He was elated that at last he would be able to begin to relax. He would be home in just a few hours.

There had been pandemonium amongst the Russian gangsters at the Buckleboo Creek pub after the mysterious disappearance of two of their number from the pub balcony immediately followed by the annihilation of three more of their guys in the Mercedes which had crashed and burned in mysterious circumstances on the road out of town. And there was the disappearance of Oleg who had been last spotted disembarking from a tug at the Rio Tinto port. The chatter on AnOn was furious.

Gawler had felt it was well and truly time to depart Buckleboo Creek. He no longer felt comfortable there. He returned to the pub and packed his belongings and tossed

them into a battered utility truck which he purloined and hotwired in the hotel car park. He pushed the ute hard as he headed out of town on the main highway to Cairns where he rendezvoused with the helicopter at a truck stop ten kilometres from town.

Gawler was heading for Venus Bay. He knew a little about the place. It has a population 416. It is a town on the eastern side of Cape York Peninsula with the Coral Sea forming its eastern boundary. Part of the northern boundary follows the Archer River, while the Venus Bay River forms part of its western boundary. All he knew about Venus Bay was that it had a hotel, a motel, a café, a general store, a post office, a police station, and a primary school.

Importantly to Gawler, Venus Bay had an airstrip 24 kilometres north of the town. His destination was the airstrip. Gawler arrived by helicopter at the airstrip around midnight. He was greeted by Natasha. She had driven the Humvee to meet him. She ran to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. She pressed herself to him. It had been a tense day. Gawler could feel a slight tremble in her body.

She said: "Will they come after us?"

He said: "I doubt it. Not just yet anyway. They don't know where we are. They are distracted and have loads of problems to deal with. They may suspect us, but they would not be sure that we are responsible for what happened to their guys.

Gawler and Natasha had been booked into adjoining

rooms at the tiny motel on the edge of town. He had brought his drone packed in the helicopter with his baggage.

The rooms had an interconnecting door. Gawler checked the door. It was unlocked.

They were exhausted. Gawler slid beneath the sheets. He was naked. He always slept nude. The weather was still hot and humid. The monsoon had not yet arrived. He was soon asleep. Natasha was dog tired and couldn't sleep. She gathered her courage and went to his bed for some comfort to help her sleep. She didn't know how this could end-up, but she would try to not be tempted by him if he made a move. Anyway, he seemed to be a bit slower warming to her than she thought a man would usually be in the circumstances.

He awoke as Natasha moved softly into the room and lay beside him in the bed. She murmured, "I can't get to sleep in that room." He mumbled; "you should sleep okay here. He was lying on his side facing away from her. Her body pressed gently along his back. They fitted like spoons together and were soon asleep.

The sun was high when they surfaced in the morning. A notice on the motel room wall declared that due to water shortages patrons were requested to conserve every possible drop of water. They decided to help out the town by showering together and they skipped into the bathroom. Gawler admired Natasha's body as she stepped into the shower. She was stunning; lithe, firm, with beautiful breasts and a gorgeous arching neck.

They soaped each other under the cascading warm

shower. He stood behind her and smoothly stroked the suds onto her neck and back. He then spun her to face him as he soaped her breasts. Her nipples darkened and enlarged. They pushed out and as he caressed them, they became firm. He lifted each of her breasts and kissed and stroked her nipples with his tongue. She turned so that she was behind him and then reached around his body and soaped his chest and then his cock. She held his cock between her fingers gently squeezing it as it stiffened. She slid one finger back and forth until she felt his full shaft become firmer. Then she lightly gripped his cock and slid her soapy hand back and forth along its length until it was straight and hard. She kept her grip light and gently squeezed as she glided back and forth all the way from the swollen tip of his cock to the base.

She spun to face him and dropped to her knees.

CHAPTER 22

They pulled away from each other as the flow of water streaming from the shower tapered then stopped altogether. Gawler guessed there was probably some sort of timer on the water supply. “I think you enjoyed that shower with a happy ending” she said. “ahh yeah” he replied. “I could handle any amount of that showering.”

They towelled each other dry, dressed and strolled to the greasy- spoon café they had spotted a short way down the road from the motel. It was built to resemble a converted railroad car. Narrow with a long lunch counter on one side and a kitchen out back. Booths lined the windows looking onto the street.

The woman running the register desk was huge with ballooning breasts and a massive swathe of red hair tumbling to her shoulders. The identity card pinned to her bosom said Gladys. She had big brown eyes, a huge toothy smile, a round face and a nose that looked like a parrot’s beak. When she spoke, her head nodded up and down like a bird pecking seed. She was wearing a voluminous tee shirt and tiny red shorts. Her huge thighs looked like tree trunks. The cheeks of her arse poked out below her shorts. Her

feet were clad in what looked like bright red small canoes. She was the sort of person everybody would take an instant liking to.

Gladys cheerily served them fried bacon and eggs and tomatoes on buttered toast with steaming cappuccinos. It was a full dose of cholesterol to start the day which neither of them would usually be excited about. The coffee was hot and good. Gladys seemed nice.

Natasha softly told Gawler she had been thinking about the Buckleboo Creek situation and the problems they would need to tackle if they were sort out the Russian thugs and the Bikers.

He lowered his head and told her he was interested in any ideas she could offer. With their heads held low and their brows almost touching across the table, she whispered that she had a plan which would set the Bikers against the Russians. "If we can cause a rift between those two arms of the drug running syndicate things might degenerate to our advantage." She said. "They would not be likely to peacefully negotiate their differences, "violence is the instinctive first option for those guys. If we can stimulate them to start fighting, the whole ball game will change.", she said." So here is my plan."

Gawler's jaw dropped and his face lit up with pleasure as Natasha softly outlined the plan she had devised during that long drive along the rutted track from Buckleboo Creek.

"Yes, let's do it," he exclaimed as soon as she finished talking. "We will need to make arrangements. I will call for assistance from London right now and we can get things moving immediately."

He said with enthusiasm. “You know Natasha, I think you are amazing.”

He Stepped outside onto the veranda and called London on his mobile. It was a lengthy conversation.

Gladys was a chatty country girl. She asked them about their visit to the town. “Just passing through” Gawler said, “maybe stay a day or so. Maybe do some fishing.” She said that Arthur Hyland, the guy who owned the motel, might be able to assist them with the fishing. She said he had a sideline running deep sea fishing tours. They thanked her and walked back to the motel.

A faded looking office in a building next door to the motel had a sign above the window Hyland’s Fishing Tours. Gawler wanted to talk with the motel owner about finding a place to park his Humvee which would not be obvious from the road. He had spotted a large old semi dilapidated barn out the back of the motel, perhaps he could park there. And they could talk about a fishing tour. A fishing tour to Buckleboo Creek would be the key to Natasha’s plan to screw the Russians.

Arthur Hyland was a thin pale little chain smoking balding former Englishman, Gawler thought probably in his mid-sixties. He was happy enough for Gawler to park the Humvee in the barn. There was nothing much in the barn he said, just some mice and an old tractor and some bits and pieces of fishing stuff. “That sounds fine”, Gawler said.

Arthur asked about their travel plans. Gawler said they were from Melbourne and were passing through. He said they had driven along that terrible road from Buckleboo Creek and would probably stay a few days. Maybe go on a tour on his fishing boat if that would be okay. Arthur said, “You’ve been in Buckleboo Creek then. Pretty rough over there these days I hear.”

“That sounds right,” Gawler said.

Arthur told them he had moved to Venus Bay from Melbourne a while back. He knew Melbourne very well. Had lived there for years. He had sold a bookselling business which he had established and run for decades selling books specializing in flying saucers, unidentified flying objects, UFO’s and flat earth theories. He said all of his customers were batshit mad conspiracy fanatics. After years of listening to them he said he just wanted out. So, he had sold the business and moved to this nice quiet place.

Gawler said he wanted to make a booking with Arthur to sail in his fishing trawler out onto the Coral Sea and then around the top of the Gulf of Carpentaria and down the coast to Albatross Bay to a spot not far offshore from Buckleboo Creek. He said he had seen enough of Buckleboo Creek by land and wanted to do some exploring from offshore with his drone. If Arthur could anchor in the bay for a couple of hours that would suit him fine. He reckoned it would be an overnight trip.

“No problem”, Arthur said. He was happy to take on a job like that. They agreed on a cost for the trip and arranged to set sail early on a day to be set as soon as they

had returned from Cairns where he said he and Natasha had some business to sort out.

Gawler and Natasha took a stroll around the block to look at whatever sights the town had to offer as they wandered back to the motel. Natasha stopped off as they passed the local school where a few kids were playing a game of scratch basketball.

She jumped the fence and joined the kids in their game. She cornered the ball and shot a few hoops with the kids. She was a class act on the court and had a great time playing with the kids. They loved it when she showed them a few moves and passed on some tips. The kids immediately gravitated to her. As they departed the kids called; “when are you coming back Natasha?” “Soon I hope,” she said.

Natasha did not yet know that Gawler had been tracking the messages between the Russians back in Buckleboo Creek on his AnOm. When they got back to the motel, he showed her how the AnOm worked. And she learned the reason for the trip he had just organised with Arthur for some time in the following days.

He was starting to flesh out in his mind the details for plan of action against the Russians she had suggested over breakfast

He told her that he now knew that another ship was due to arrive at Buckleboo Creek, and it was not just delivering Cocaine. It was going to make a collection. The time had come for payment to be made by the mobsters for the

cocaine that had been flooding into the town and from there being distributed right across the country.

Natasha said to Gawler that she wanted to talk with him about his attitude. She said, “Sam, you know I like you very much. That is clear. I think I am in danger of falling for you. But that is not a problem. I want you to treat me properly. I want you to tell me what is going on. You told Arthur Hyland that we were going to Cairns tomorrow but that was the first I knew of it. You are making plans that involve me and not telling me what the plans are and why you have made them. Could you please show me more respect?”

Gawler told her that he had been speaking on the phone with the James at the corporation’s head office in London about the plan she had proposed over breakfast to seriously disrupt the Russians. It had been decided at the top level of the company that they would assist the Australian Drug Enforcement Authority to carry out a big drug bust against the Russian syndicate operating out of Buckleboo Creek. The unlawful activities of the syndicate were impacting on the company’s operations, and they believed these things were linked with the theft of gold from the processing plant.

Gawler said he was sorry he hadn’t told her yet about the trip to Cairns, but he was still finalizing the arrangements for them to meet with high level officials from the Australian Drug Enforcement Authority. This was a vital part of the plan she had devised.

He vowed he liked her as much as she said she liked him, and he wanted her to be a full partner with him as they did the work that needed to be done for the corporation. He said the other big task they had on their plate was to recover the missing gold which truly belonged to the corporation.

Gawler said that he did not think it was feasible for them to try and find the safe house in Buckleboo Creek where he believed millions of dollars in value of gold was being stored. The house was sure to be heavily guarded. The Russians would have security cameras, armed guards and dogs and whatever else they needed to protect their loot. It would need a battalion of mercenaries to breach the safe house. Gawler said, “We will wait until the Russians move the gold. If we are smart, we can have them bring the gold to us. We need to track their movements and we have the technology to do that. Then we can snatch the gold from them without having to fight a small war to get it back.”

Natasha had been thinking about the direction her relationship with Gawler was taking. *She had not been able to keep her hands off him in the shower this morning. How much further would this thing she had with him go? She was wary about getting too involved with him. Should she keep a distance until she knew him better? Can I hold back?*

Natasha was relaxed with Sam now they had cleared the tension that had been creeping into their friendship. She threw her arms around him, nuzzled into his neck, kissed him and he responded with a long passionate and very wet French kiss. They tore each other's clothes off like they were on fire. She was gorgeous, firm and strong and shaped like a dream. It was frantic, rolling like nothing

could have stopped them. It was like the end of the world. They shuddered to a stop and lay gasping totally spent. Then they lay there clasped and caressing.

Gawler and Natasha had a lazy afternoon ahead of them. Gawler said he wanted to go exploring. Natasha said “Where are you going to go exploring here Sam? In this dead neck of the woods.” He said “I want to explore you. I want to visit your every nook and crevice, your beauty spots, your every hill and gully, your smooth and beautiful glades.” She said, “you could explore with your hands Sam. I would like a massage.” He said, “That’s settled then.” She said, “and after that I will explore you.” When they had finished with the exploring, they made languorous love again on the bed and again that night and again early the next morning.

They were disturbed during the night by the sounds of heavy rain on the roof. The long-delayed monsoon had at last arrived.

Later in the morning they drove to Venus Bay airstrip to catch a scheduled regular flight by light aircraft for the 820-kilometre trip to Cairns.

While they were travelling Gawler told Natasha that from this point onwards the monsoon would put a halt to Limpy’s gold sand thieving activities back at the processing plant in Buckleboo Creek and that the situation would be that way for at least the next couple of months.

He said the continuous heavy monsoonal rains would

flush out the gutters on the thickener keeping them pristinely clean. The gold sand could not settle out of the slurry before it was washed away by the rainwater. There would now be no make-believe work for Limpy around the thickener and no gold sand to collect.

They had been booked by the corporation into a luxury hotel in Cairns, the Shang- Re- Lar for the upcoming meeting with representatives of Australian Customs and the Government's Drug Enforcement Authority. Natasha said she adored the sights of the city and the hotel's tropical gardens and the views from their room of Trinity Bay and Marlin Marina.

The meeting in the hotel's conference room got under way mid-morning. Gawler had his work cut out explaining the situation to the sceptical drug enforcers. They were not accustomed to having civilians telling them what was happening on their turf. And they didn't really think they needed to hear about a plan to make a drug bust from an incoming cargo ship.

The meeting went all day as Gawler and Natasha meticulously laid out the details of their plan for the drug bust. It was to take place at Gladstone, an industrial port further south down the coast from Cairns. They had trouble convincing the government guys to keep the bust secret until an interval after it happened and to forgo the usual blaze of publicity, they would get from a big drug bust.

The government guys needed the publicity, but Gawler did not. It was essential to Gawler and the corporation' plan

that the Russian mobsters must remain unaware that their incoming haul had been busted before the ship arrived at Buckleboo Creek.

Gawler and Natasha were eventually satisfied that their long day of talking, and persuasion had been fruitful. The government guys had eventually agreed to the proposal for the bust in Gladstone in two days' time and they also agreed make some unusual preparation that Gawler and Natasha had requested which would ultimately infuriate the Russian mobsters.

They had a wonderful seafood meal at the hotel restaurant. The food was utterly fresh and delectable. They were completely relaxed with each other. They laughed at private jokes, touched, and smooched and canoodled like teenagers across the table. The tense times they had spent together were bringing them emotionally close and every minute together was bringing them closer. Gawler hungered for Natasha's body. He wanted all of her.

She fantasised about them rolling together while his cock slid and pulsed inside her. Her thoughts were making her wet. She seemed distracted as she daydreamed. She imagined lying on top of him with their damp skins blending into one. She longed to sit naked on him and glide up and down as if she was riding a pony with his swollen cock inside her. They were lusting for each other so feverishly that it was surely obvious to the restaurant staff who had been enviously watching them. They were oblivious to anyone in the restaurant other than themselves. They were preoccupied with each other. They were not

honeymooners but could easily be mistaken for them. Gawler said to her, “this is supposed to be a business trip, but I think it might become business plus.”

She said, “I hope so Sam.”

She was breathing deeply. Slightly gasping. She said, “Sam, I need you. I want you to take me to our room, carry me to the bed and make sweet love to me all night long”.

In the morning Natasha said. “I read something once about love written by an author in a letter to his lover, I think his name was Henry. I kept a copy of his letter in my diary and have carried it with me ever since. I want to tell you what he wrote to her. After I tell you what he said in the letter can you tell me if you feel that way about me Sam. This is the letter.”

‘I say this is a wild dream—but it is the dream I want to realize. Love the dynamo, you with your chameleon’s soul giving me a thousand loves, being anchored always in no matter what storm, home wherever we are. In the mornings, continuing where we left off. Resurrection after resurrection. You are asserting yourself, getting the rich varied life you desire; and the more you assert yourself the more you want me, need me. Your voice getting hoarser, deeper, your eyes blacker, your blood thicker, your body fuller. A voluptuous servility and tyrannical necessity. Crueller now than before—consciously, wilfully cruel. The insatiable delight of experience.’

Sam said. “They are beautiful words Natasha. I wish I could have written them to you.”

CHAPTER 23

The cattle transport ship Ocean Outback was due to take on board at Gladstone port, a load of cattle to be discharged at the Rio Tinto docks in Buckleboo Creek which would then be transported by truck to the local abattoir.

Gawler and Natasha had flown to Gladstone to prepare for the ship's arrival. They double checked on the arrangements with the local Customs chief who was overseeing preparations for the ship's arrival and the reception they had waiting for it.

They joined a group of men and women at the fuel tender maintenance dock. The people at the dock were dressed in navy blue boiler suits with black gloves and heavy steel capped boots. They looked trim and fit, ready for any action. There was a professional undersea diver with the group, fully suited and ready for work. Gawler could see on the road not far away from the dock, two manned police vehicles and another couple of unmarked cars that could also be law enforcement vehicles. A large, unmarked van was parked nearby with a couple more boiler suited guys waiting inside.

Two heavily wrapped black waterproof bundles tied

with black and white shipping rope that looked like stuffed body bags were on the deck of the fuel tender. The tender left the dock and travelled the short distance to the Ocean Outback. Two of the boiler suited men on board coupled the fuel lines from the tender to the Ocean Outback. The tender had been positioned precisely above the point on the ship where the ship's sea chest was located below sea level. It would appear to an unknowing observer that a normal maintenance operation was underway. The maintenance guys commenced refuelling the ship.

The diver was lowered into the water and soon surfaced with a rope which two of the men on the tender used to haul aboard a heavy black waterproof body bag. It looked unmistakably like the two dry bags already sitting on the deck of the fuel tender. They went through the same routine and hauled another body bag on board. The diver then reversed the process and delivered each of the replacement body bags to the ship's sea chest. The total job had been seamless and swift.

The maintenance guys then declared the refuelling process complete and disconnected the fuel lines. Anybody watching would have to think that that this had been an impossibly quick refuelling job. But Gawler was here to see if anybody he recognised had been watching and he hadn't noticed anyone snooping around.

Several other men in boiler suits at the tender maintenance wharf assisted with unloading the two body bags from the fuel tender and transferred them to the waiting van which then sped away with police escorts ahead and behind. The drug seizure had been a thoroughly neat action. It had gone

off perfectly. Gawler called it a switcheroo. After a couple of weeks had elapsed the customs and drug cops would be able to hold a triumphant press conference to show the world their magnificent haul. Multi million dollars in street value of cocaine had been detected and seized and would now not be going onto the streets in many parts of Australia. Politicians would be delighted and where possible they would join the line of heroes who had orchestrated the bust. Congratulations and joy all round.

Gawler and Natasha unobtrusively slipped away. They had an aeroplane to catch tonight back to Venus Bay to set up the next stage of their project.

It was still raining in Venus Bay. It hadn't stopped while they had been away. Monsoons are like that. They slept soundly together that night in Gawler's room at the motel. She had not spent any time in her room. His room had naturally become their room.

They slept late and quickly showered chastely together to save water. This morning they restrained their lust. They carried a huge umbrella the motel provided and tripped down the road to Gladys's greasy spoon café. Gladys was cheerful and obviously glad to see them. The other customers in the café were a couple of truckies and a sprinkling of tourists probably passing through the town. They took a pass on the fried food Gladys was offering and settled for porridge, scrambled eggs, fresh fruit salad and extra hot coffee. Gladys asked them about their plans. They told her they were making arrangements with Arthur Hyland to go on a fishing trip tomorrow and would probably be away for

a couple of days. They promised to bring back some fish for her assuming luck would be running their way.

They called at Arthur's office to settle the arrangements for their fishing trip which they wanted to firm up as a definite booking for the next day. Arthur said there were no problems, and the arrangements were agreed. Arthur told them that everything they would need would be provided as part of the deal. This included heavy duty wet weather gear, fishing tackle and baits and enough food for three days in case there was any delay returning from the planned two-day trip.

Gawler was tracking the Ocean Outback on the shipping movements web page as it travelled northwards up the eastern coast towards Buckleboo Creek with its shipment of cattle. He was also keeping abreast on Anom with the Russian mobsters who were making their arrangements to meet the ship when it arrived and to distribute the cocaine amongst the biker gang who had begun to filter back into the town.

He was anticipating trouble from the Russians when they discovered that no cocaine would be coming their way this time. The bikers would also not be happy if there was nothing forthcoming for them from the Russians. He could imagine the anger and the mutual suspicions that his actions in Gladstone would generate not only in Buckleboo Creek but further south in the cities where the drug trade flourished. He was anticipating the anger could become so intense that the infighting amongst the drug gangs and the bikers could undermine their cartel agreements. All aspects of the drug trade were run by very violent criminals whose

first reaction to a problem was to settle the issue with a gun or knife.

There was not much else they needed to do until their trip with Arthur tomorrow, so Sam and Natasha decided without a lot of chatter about it that there was no better way to spend their afternoon together than to canoodle away on the bed to their heart's content. They were hungry for each other. Their lust was gnawing at them.

BALBOA[®]PRESS

CHAPTER 24

Arthur Hyland's Ocean-going fishing launch was a formidable looking beast. He told them it was fully equipped for rough seas and had enough power to handle any eventuality at sea. It was equipped with a full complement of safety gear including life jackets, flares and an inflatable diesel-powered rubber duckie lifeboat. The cabin had accommodation for six people. There was a fully equipped galley. The launch had two big diesel engines below deck and sufficient fuel in its tanks for five day's continuous travelling. There would be no mistaking what sort of boat it was. A large sign on each side read Hyland's Fishing Tours. Arthur had a crew of one, a fit looking tanned, cheerful young guy Dennis, who looked about eighteen or twenty years old. They stowed Gawler's drone below decks for safe keeping. He had included some accessories in a locked box which they also needed to keep safe.

They headed north in the Coral Sea following the east coast towards the tip of the Cape York peninsular, the foremost northern point of Australia. Once they had rounded the cape they would be sailing in the Gulf of Carpentaria. They would travel down the coast southward

to Albatross Bay where they would anchor offshore not far out from the Buckleboo Creek port to do some fishing. Not a complicated journey. They would not even need a map.

They planned to arrive at their destination by daylight the next morning. The Ocean Outback was scheduled to arrive a little later in the morning. The ship would need to follow the usual procedure of standing off from the port while clearance to enter was signalled and the tug had connected the towing cable.

They arrived at the bay in the early morning with time to spare. It was still raining heavily. Rain was not a problem to keen fishers. The fish were biting, and they enjoyed their fishing with the help of Dennis who turned out to be an expert. They stored the fish they caught in the boat's refrigerator to take back to Venus Bay for Gladys. Gawler did some reconnaissance with his drone. The Russians were preparing their rubber duckie for the arrival of the Ocean Outback.

The party on board Hyland's Fishing Tour launch continued fishing. They looked harmless enough. Gawler thought they would not cause the Russians to be concerned about them.

Natasha hadn't seen Gawler and Dennis on deck for a while. She went down the steps to the galley on the lower deck to make some coffee. The door to the sleeping area was closed. She could hear Sam and Dennis talking on the other side of the door. Sam had asked Dennis if he had a girlfriend.

Dennis was speaking. "I turn 20 years old in 2 days and

I am still a virgin. I am bitter and sad about it. Whenever I see guys my age or even younger holding hands or kissing attractive girls, I feel so envious of them and feel so angry that I missed out on sex and dating when I was younger.

“I know people are either gonna say that teenage relationships don’t last or that sex at that age is awkward and you don’t know what you’re doing first off. When I was in high school, I often saw boys make out and touch beautiful girls and holy shit I was so jealous of them. It looked so fun and pleasurable.”

Gawler said, “What about other men. Do you have thoughts about them?”

Dennis said, “What I’ve found from being on the launch and talking to some of the men fishing with us is that there seems to be this fear of being vulnerable with other men who may be gay. With some men saying they find it easier being with straight people than with gay men. Which makes it sound like being a gay man is loaded.

I think many gay men don’t know how to simply be with each other, in a non-sexualised way. What do you think about that sort of thing Sam?”

Gawler said, “I think everybody is a little bi. It’s not like Trump saying you’re either with us or with the communists. I think I’m probably bi but what I present to the world is a heterosexual man. I think internally I’m bi, but that’s not something most people know. I’m not ashamed, but people are ignorant with closed minds.

“I am not openly bisexual to society except in sexual situations. I don’t have relationships with men; I am in a relationship with Natasha only and love her. I’m bisexual only with men behind closed doors.”

Dennis asked. “How is sex and dating as an adult? I mean for men who are in their mid-20s or older? How would you feel if extremely beautiful women wanted to be with you? I have so much fear and worries that I am gonna be a grown man and I won’t have much desire for sex. I have heard of men getting bored of their beautiful wives or needing Viagra to enjoy sex. I just wish I could go back in time and try again.”

Natasha quietly went to the stairs and returned to the upper deck. She forgot about the idea of making coffee.

By mid-morning the Ocean Outback had arrived and before it had stopped the Russians were at its side in their rubber duckie. There were three of them on board. One of them was wearing scuba gear which Natasha immediately recognised. “That’s Oleg’s scuba gear” she said. They had obviously dug up some sort of bunny to replace Oleg and retrieved the scuba gear Oleg had left on the tug when he hitched a ride on it last week.

Gawler was watching his vision from the drone as the Russians quickly moved into action. The scuba diver brought the first body bag of ‘*contraband*’ up to the surface and dived for the second one. After both wet body bags were on board the duckie the scuba diver and the other two

Russians unloaded from the duckie what appeared from the way they handled it to be a very heavy dry bag. He dived under the water with the bag and then repeated the dive with a second similar heavy looking bag.

The gangsters were all done. The duckie headed back to shore where Gawler could see a reception party was waiting. Gawler manoeuvred the drone in closer to the duckie. He was lining it up for a bombing run.

But Gawler was in mental turmoil over what he was about to do. He was going to try and kill three living, mortal people.

Sure, they were evil people and he hated them for what they did. He hated the misery and death their drug trading was causing. But he was not God. I am acting like a god deciding on their elimination as living mortals. Bombing them was his decision alone. No-one else had ordered him to do this. This was not some desk top game. He was acting it out on a video screen, and it was real. Those men had mothers, perhaps wives or girlfriends maybe children. If today, they died someone who loved them would hurt and grieve for them for perhaps many years to come.

But if he allowed them to continue in their duckie back to shore unharmed, there was nobody who would criticise him for it. But if he did nothing their deadly lives of crime would continue and the mothers and loved ones of many more innocent but misguided young people would be the sufferers. There was law enforcement in this country; it was they who should be capturing them, and the lawful process should decide on whatever punishment these thugs should suffer. He was losing concentration on what he had planned a week ago for this moment and what he had set out to do since the

switcheroo in Gladstone. He had set events in motion which had brought him to this point in time. He knew if he was going ahead with the plan he needed to act quickly.

The drone had been drifting off course. The Russians had looked up at the sky and had spotted the drone. He had to act now but he was dithering, he was faltering.

Natasha grabbed the controller and took over driving the drone. They both recognised that she would be better at driving, more decisive than him.

They needed to power the drone closer to the duckie and to place it directly above the Russians cowering in it. The Russians had pistols and had started firing at the drone. Their shots were panicked and random and widely off the mark.

Natasha tried to manoeuvre the drone to spoil the Russians' aim, but it was hit by a couple of lucky shots. Two of the propellers were knocked out. The drone was now out of control. It was spinning crazily. It was vertically above the gangsters when it plunged directly down into the centre of the duckie. The Russians jumped away from where it lay on the floor of the duckie. They had clearly not prepared for any eventuality like this.

The drone appeared to be totally destroyed. Gawler was starting to despair. All their planning for this moment seemed to have come to naught. As a last resort Gawler yelled to Natasha to release the hand grenade pin. He sweated on it still being functional. She calmly replied. "There's no need for you to yell at me Sam". He counted to ten as all of the crew on board Arthur's launch watched

and listened. The hand grenade exploded with a thump which ricocheted across the water.

“You little beauty”, Gawler yelled. The explosion had blown a gaping hole in the bottom of the duckie and seriously injured the three Russians. The duckie quickly sank beneath the waves. The Russians floundered around in the water, but they were badly injured. They were bleeding profusely. Their blood in the water and their smashed flesh soon attracted several crocodiles which commenced to greedily dismember the Russians. The body bags of contraband did not seem to interest the crocodiles and they floated away.

The gang on board Arthur’s launch could see and hear tremendous consternation from the Russian reception party on shore. The shore was too far away for the Russians to have seen the drone, but they had heard and witnessed some sort of explosion on the duckie and had witnessed the turmoil in the water as the crocodiles chewed up their colleagues.

The Russians desperately wanted the body bags. Those bags were their business lifeline. They commandeered a small fishing cruiser from a nearby dock and rushed to the scene of the disaster. They were able to retrieve the body bags which had floated a few metres away. It was clear to the onlookers on Arthur’s launch that the Russians were relieved to be able to haul the bags onto the yacht.

Gawler and Natasha and their party had finished fishing and had packed up their gear. They cautiously started to

cruise out of the vicinity of the disaster. They could hear piercing screams, shouting and cursing from the Russians who had reached the shore and were starting to unwrap the body bags.

They had taken delivery of a couple of dead sheep. This was not at all like what they had expected to find in the bags. Gawler was interested to watch how the Russians would now manage their massive setback. They were facing a large gang of bikers waiting in town to collect the cocaine they had been contracted to pick up and deliver. The bikers would think they had been duped. Their fury would be explosive.

Arthur opened the throttle on the launch, and powered it northwards parallel to the coastline along the Gulf Of Carpentaria peninsular, heading for home. Arthur was laughing about what had happened with the drone. He had enjoyed the spectacle immensely. He said it reminded him of his days years ago in the British Royal Air Force where he had been a navigator. He told them he had been stationed in Australia during the Korean war, and when the war ended, he had decided to remain in Australia. He said when he saw Gawler's drone crash into the Russian's duckie, he thought it was something like what a Kamikaze fighter would do. He was relaxed now with Gawler and Natasha and wanted to chat.

CHAPTER 25

Arthur told them that he knew of one guy who in days gone by would be very disappointed with this situation where a load of cocaine had gone missing.

“He was a punter from Sydney named Flower who regularly came to Venus Bay for my fishing expeditions. But he is not around these days. Went away for a spell.”

Arthur said, “This guy was heavily into horse racing. He told me he had a horse called Schnitzel because that was the nickname he got when, as a 17-year-old he was hit by a car. It smashed his legs and hip, leaving him looking like a schnitzel.

“Rumours had swirled even up here about the source of Flower’s wealth.,

“I’d heard the rumours, so I asked him what he did. He just talked around the question.

“So, I asked again, and he didn’t respond. He just stared at me, gave me this really long, hard stare, which made it clear that I shouldn’t ask a third time.”

“Another fishing client, who was a mate of Flower’s, told me they heard rumours about Flower’s connection to organised crime. He said one day he saw an open suitcase in

a wardrobe at his house, stuffed with cash. “I didn’t ask him about it,” he said. “I thought maybe it was just gambling winnings.”

Arthur said, “Rumours had been running in the racing industry about Flower’s source of wealth after a television sports program ran a five-minute video profile of him and his luxurious \$4.5 million stables.”

Flower said in the video “I look at racing and I love it. “I love all aspects of it, I love the racing side of it, I love the sales — I really love the sales — but the horses themselves, they’re really lovely animals.”

Arthur said, “The video, was set to gentle guitar and violin music, The video rolled over the dozens of thoroughbred horses and the state-of-the-art training facility.

Arthur said, “Few people would have known that this guy’s racing empire was built on the global trade in cocaine.

“It turned out he had been dealing in cocaine smuggled into the country through the Russians operating out of Buckleboo Creek. He was secretly building a cocaine empire. He had bought racehorses in partnership with some famous Sydneysiders. He had millions of dollars stored in cars, houses and in a storage unit owned by an associate.

Arthur said, “Horse racing has been known to be infiltrated by organised crime figures since it commenced. The beauty about the horseracing game is that you can either buy assets individually, or you can buy them with a group of other people, which doesn’t diminish your wealth, but doesn’t allow asset confiscation groups to make

a complete claim on your assets. “The criminals are able to operate in plain sight.”

“When Flower was arrested, a friend of his said to me, ‘One minute I’m crying, worried about a great buddy and thinking about how he must be feeling sitting there in jail. The next minute I’m so angry and just want to throttle him. I guess we will never understand what has happened.’”

Arthur said, “Flower once worked as a baggage handler at Sydney airport. That’s where he developed his underworld connections. It was during those times as a baggage handler that he bought his first thoroughbreds.

“Flower had once been named as a racing industry leader, but his double life came crashing down when he was arrested. He later pleaded guilty to importing 228 kilograms of pure cocaine. Flower had gone from to racing royalty to persona non grata.”

Arthur said, “What I want to know is what are they doing to make sure the sport of horse racing is not used as a money laundry by local and foreign organised criminals?”

“Don’t ask me”, Natasha said. “I’m just a violinist.”

Natasha and Gawler went to have a short lie-down on the narrow bunks in the downstairs cabin. They soon drifted off to sleep to the hum of the launch’s engines beneath them. It was early the following morning when they awoke from their little lie-down.

CHAPTER 26

The launch was pulling into the dock at Venus Bay. Arthur drove them with their haul of fish to Gladys's café. They asked Gladys if she could cook them a fish breakfast. "Sure" she said, "I would enjoy doing that". They feasted on a breakfast of poached coral trout with mashed potatoes, buttered toast and baked tomatoes and bacon. Gladys said she would make up a special fish menu for the day. She would be having soup mornay and a medley of delicious sounding fish concoctions. They said they would be coming back later in the day for that.

A large television screen in the café was showing a news program from Buckleboo Creek. A female presenter and crew had been flown into the town by helicopter. They had hurriedly set up their equipment and were now broadcasting live. The reporter was a woman of mature age who had been a major presence in the past on the big mainstream channels but was now fading and working on less important broadcasts. She looked as though she had put on her makeup in the dark without a mirror as

the helicopter made a bumpy landing. Slightly clownish looking, but who cared? This was a big breaking story.

According to the reporter, all hell had broken loose at Buckleboo Creek overnight. Long simmering bad feelings between biker gangs and the Russian thugs had exploded when a promised delivery of cocaine had not arrived.

She said the bikers seemed grieved They had ridden hundreds of kilometres to make the drug pick-up and the Russians had let them down. The bikers had told her they had been betrayed. There had been fierce hand to hand fighting between the bikers and the Russian gangsters in the main street and inside the pub. The brawlers were fairly evenly matched, and no winner had been declared.

The camera zoomed in on Limpy wandering dazedly along the street. He had two heavily blackened eyes, a bruised and bleeding face and his jaw was hanging loosely detached from its hinges. His speech was a slurred mumble.

The Elvis Presley look-alike bartender was stumbling around. He looked either drunk or semi-conscious or perhaps both.

The three strippers were being chased by a bunch of bikers. The strippers were sprinting, but the bikers were not built to run, they were fat and clumsy and had no chance of catching them. They seemed to be out of their natural element which was on a motor bike. The bikers turned their attention to the woman television reporter. They surrounded her. She snarled at them, and they quickly lost interest. They would be smart enough to know that

harassing a reporter live on television would not be a good look for them.

Video previously recorded from the helicopter showed smashed furniture outside the pub and smashed windows along the street. A couple of motor bikes were lying burnt-out on the road. There were wounded bikers and Russians stumbling around on the street. The television reporter said that the bikers had now retreated to their camp on the edge of town and appeared to be regrouping.

Everyone in Glady's café was now glued watching the television. They saw a squad of bikers come thundering down the Buckleboo Creek main street. A couple of them dismounted and threw a bunch of flaming Molotov cocktails into the pub.

The fire quickly spread through the tinder dry building and soon reached the roof of the pub. Something inside the building exploded. A shower of flames and burnt pieces of timber was thrown into the air. The building imploded and was soon just a pile of smouldering timber and twisted metal.

Just then the town's small volunteer fire brigade arrived on the scene. There was not much they could do about the pub. It was gone. The bikers formed into a vee formation and angrily roared out of the town down the highway on the long return journey to Cairns which was the only decent sized town they could get to directly from Buckleboo Creek.

The television commentator said that the police presence in the town consisted of only two officers, a

husband-and-wife team, who did not have the capacity to intervene in the brawl. Reinforcements had been called for and a team of police from Cairns was expected to arrive soon by air.

Natasha told Gawler that she knew the two cops rarely left the police station. They lived in a unit at the rear of the station and spent most of their time on paperwork. They were on call 24 hours, 7 days. In reality this meant calls at night and weekends were automatically forwarded to the big cop station at Cairns 800 kilometres away. Calls to Cairns were directed to a recorded message which informed the caller that all officers were busy at the moment and would attend to the matter the following day.

The next item on the television news was about a big drug bust that morning at Gladstone Port. A lot of cops, customs guys and drug squad people, and politicians were basking in the television arc lights and providing commentary on the drug bust.

Gawler took a breath and said softly to Natasha; “They are so impatient; they just couldn’t wait to make that announcement. Anyway, their timing worked for us. Now the Russians will know what happened to their drug shipment and they can stop looking for someone to blame.”

Gawler said to Natasha that he figured nothing had been resolved by the shooting of Capable Elwood, but the Russians could relax a little bit now that Capable was out of the way. It was also now probable that war was imminent between the drug gang’s interstate over the shooting of

‘Capable’ and also the other things that had gone wrong in Buckleboo Creek largely because of what he and Natasha had initiated.

After breakfast Natasha said to Gawler, “Surely the Russians would be wanting to retrieve the gold back from the Ocean Outback. They had used the gold to pay for the cocaine which had somehow gone missing and been substituted by dead sheep before the Ocean Outback had arrived in Buckleboo Creek. But of course, they knew where the gold was – it was still on board the Ocean Outback. They had put it there themselves.”

She said, “Obviously, your Consolidated Rutile Corporation also wanted the gold back, it was rightfully theirs. How can the Russians be stopped from getting the gold off the ship?”

Gawler said. “The Russians would have no chance of getting the gold while the ship was unloading the cattle at the port at Buckleboo Creek and then loading a shipment of sheep for shipment to Melbourne for delivery to an abattoir at Colac.”

“They go into the abattoir as sheep and come out packaged as lamb chops or leg of lamb.”

He told her that he knew for a fact that an anonymous caller had tipped off the customs and security detail at Buckleboo Creek port that Russian gangsters would be trying to get access to the Ocean Outback for drug importation purposes. The anonymous caller had been assured that security was being tightened at the port all around the clock.

Natasha said, I wonder who would make such a call to

the port security and the cops.” Gawler winked and told her. “I wouldn’t have a clue about who would do that, but the two of us will personally need to track the Ocean Outback wherever it went from here. It is still our main assignment to get that gold returned to its rightful owners.”

Everything Gawler and Natasha were involved in was now in flux. They agreed they would need to make a reassessment of the situation. Gawler said he could see no option but for them to return to Buckleboo Creek. Not a very attractive idea for either of them.

“Let’s sum up,” he said.

“The Russian gangsters will be disorientated. They have lost eight of their gang, the crocodiles got five of them, they lost another three when the Mercedes crashed and burned and they lost their scuba diver Oleg, who of course was not a member of their gang but had been very valuable to them. I doubt the drug trafficking consortium will send reinforcements now they know that the drug enforcement cops have cracked their shipping methodology. My guess is that the Russians will move on now from Buckleboo Creek. And the biker gangs will not be returning to Buckleboo Creek. They will not be getting the call for more drug delivery assignments from the Russians.”

“That leaves us with the task of cleaning out the remaining tentacles of the Russian mob at the gold processing plant. We can sort out that situation almost completely legally without any violence or bloodshed.

“But how to return now to Buckleboo Creek? The track you drove along in the Humvee to get here is ridiculous. Three and a half hours of agonizing bumping and shaking along that road does not appeal. The track was dry when you came down, now it will be like a swimming hole in some places. There is no air link between Venus Bay and Buckleboo Creek. And we have no place to live there now that the pub is gone.

“That just leaves us with the option of Arthur Hyland and his six-bunk fishing launch. I doubt he will welcome us coming to see him again today. He will be still unpacking from our trip back this morning. But we will just have to grit our teeth and ask him to take us back to Buckleboo Creek again and to accommodate us there on his launch for a few days. They decided to go and speak with Arthur.

CHAPTER 27

“You will never believe what has happened Arthur.” Gawler said. “We need to urgently return to Buckleboo Creek to tidy up some business at the gold plant. We have no way or getting there, and we wondered if you could take us back in the launch and moor there at the jetty for a few days while we sort out a few issues. You could take a well-earned break over there for a while, and I am sure you will find a few things to keep you busy while we are away at the plant during the day.

Arthur was interested. They negotiated a cost. An arrangement was agreed. They would head back out to sea first thing next morning.

Gawler planned overnight with James in London to secretly set up a snap drug and alcohol test station at the processing plant’s front entrance for early the next Monday morning. The company policy was that blood alcohol and drug level for all employees was mandated at zero per cent. Breaches would be penalized with instant dismissal. But this regulation had never been policed at the plant. Weekend parties and binge drinking at Buckleboo Creek was endemic. On a typical Monday morning nobody

reporting for work would pass a drug and alcohol test. Gawler knew he would need to ignore some test failures, or the company would have very few employees left, but they could legally terminate the people they had identified as part of the gold smuggling operation. The company could avoid any union complications and all people being terminated would be paid their full entitlements including wages owed, holiday pay and a terminated without notice settlement.

People working at the plant were accommodated by the company at the Single Person's Quarters, SPQ, and this arrangement would cease from the moment employment was terminated. Sacked workers would be assisted to immediately leave the town. They would be driven by bus to Cairns. After that they would need to make their own arrangements.

They set sail next day as planned. Arthur powered the launch Northwards up the coast of the Coral Sea. Arthur yarned about some of his life experiences. He said that he had sold his bookshop to his son-in-law, Malcolm Geitzelt, a traumatized former schoolteacher. Malcolm was comfortable talking all day with the crazy customers at the bookshop. He patiently listened to them with a far-away expression on his face not really taking much of notice of their ravings. He had told Arthur that bookshop life was a relief after what he had gone been subjected to in the tough western suburban schools in Melbourne where he had been working for years as a teacher.

Arthur said his bookshop customers had always wanted to tell him a lot of stuff about their personal lives. One

guy seemed to have a new girlfriend every other week and Arthur had to hear everything about the girlfriends' anatomical features and her bedtime preferences. Another customer, a woman, seemed to be preoccupied with finding the perfect vibrator. She often told him she was testing the latest model on the market, and she insisted on explaining their features to Arthur. She turned up one day with an enormous battery-operated dildo she had just purchased. Arthur asked her if she was sure she could handle it. She said. She was certainly going to try.

Another guy seemed to be obsessed with the various types of garden fertilizer available on the market, so Arthur said he had to spend hours listening to the guy spouting the virtues of each brand of fertilizer.

And a customer who was an expert on extra-terrestrial flight, creatures from other galaxies and life in other universes told Arthur about an international conference on these subjects he had attended in Hawaii. He had been immensely impressed by the other experts he had encountered at the conference, particularly a gorgeous woman who he dreamed of fucking if he could get together with her again. He was widely read on these subjects and told Arthur about his extensive home library. Arthur asked him about his books, "What sort of books were they?" He asked. "Science fiction," the guy replied. "Well, that's fiction" Arthur had replied. "I know that" the guy replied, "But it's true fiction". "Well, I'll be bugged" Arthur said. "I've been selling books for years and I've never heard of true fiction." He asked Gawler and Natasha; "Can you see why I had to get out of that line of business?"

CHAPTER 28

Arthur's launch arrived at the Buckleboo Creek jetty at dusk. It had been raining steadily for the entire journey. It was hot and humid - normal. The sky was heavy with dark cumulus clouds. Rumbling thunder and lightning greeted them. They went for a stroll to Krystal Chung's café. Business was brisk. Customers from the defunct pub had gravitated to Krystal's place. There was the usual hubbub. The place was steamy. Wafts of Krystal's delicacies enticed them as they found themselves a table. The main view from the café was of the remains of the pub. Heaps of blackened timber beams and twisted rusty metal roof sheeting. Broken windows in the buildings along the street had been boarded up.

Krystal served them dish after dish of standard Chinese food. Standard, but cooked to perfection, beef with black bean sauce, Peking duck, honey chicken, pork knuckle and large bowls of rice. Continuous pots of Chinese tea served in delicate tiny cups.

They shared the dishes around the table. Arthur had an instant rapport with Krystal as they chattered about the food. He joked about the joys of cooking in general and

asked her if the fish supply was keeping up okay for her right now. She said she needed more fish each day. Business was lot busier now that the pub had been destroyed. He said he would bring her more fish tomorrow. He told her about the feature of his launch. He flirted. He told her he wanted to bring her any amount of fresh fish.

Gawler and Natasha started work early next morning overiewing the complete staff lists of the people working at the processing plant. Natasha had a handle on most of the people who she knew had collaborated in the gold theft scheme. Gawler told her, "For a start the entire security team has to be assumed to be implicated in the gold thefts. Anybody associated with Limpy, and the strippers would also have to go.

During his safety inspections Gawler had noted some people who he reckoned just didn't fit into a typical plant employee profile. He had earmarked them as people who would need to be weeded out. Maybe there would be some errors, but it was unavoidable.

Early Monday morning a team of white uniformed drug and alcohol testing specialists had set up their equipment in a tent adjacent to the main entrance to the plant. Every worker would be tested before entering the plant. Any person not arriving for work would be visited at their living quarters by a separate team of testers who were standing-by on the ready. There was no escaping the test. People to be tested were escorted to the toilet where a heavysset mature age nurse sat on a stool next to the toilet bowl. Some men were reluctant to pee with the nurse in such

close proximity. She told them not to be bashful. She was a urology nurse she said and had spent a lifetime looking at men's genitals. She said." I have seen thousands of dicks; you could not surprise me."

Women workers would experience a similar testing regime in the women's toilet.

People failing the test were escorted to a large tourist bus which drove them to their living quarters where they were allowed ten minutes to pack one bag of belongings. By mid-morning the bus was full and had departed on the long journey to Cairns. The next bus was filling rapidly.

It took a full day to test every worker at the plant. Gawler and Natasha needed to move on from Buckleboo Creek. The Ocean Outback with the stolen gold in its sea chest was due to sail for Melbourne with a fresh cargo – sheep.

They planned to have a last meal at Krystal's restaurant and then spend another night on Arthur's launch. Arthur was in great charismatic form as he entertained Krystal.

Next morning, Gawler and Natasha would be flying by private jet to Melbourne. Both Arthur and Dennis planned to stay on in Buckleboo Creek to do some more fishing and spend some quality time with Krystal.

CHAPTER 29

Gawler and Natasha stepped through the front doors into the entrance lobby at the Eureka Towers apartment building. They were greeted by the concierge on duty behind the reception desk.

Gawler grinned; “Hi Nicole” he said.

Nicole was a buxom blonde German expatriate, about Natasha’ age.

Nicole greeted him, “Hey Sam, you’ve been gone a while? We’ve been missing you.”

She stepped out from behind the desk, threw her arms around him and held him close for longer than Natasha thought would be appropriate.

“Oh yeah. After I sorted that spot of bother in Cameroon, I had to meet up with an old buddy in London and since then I’ve been on a project up north in Queensland.”

Nicole said, “Well you probably didn’t hear about the big law enforcement bust down the road at Crown Casino?”

“No, that hasn’t crossed my radar. What’s it all about?”

“Big scandal concerning money laundering,” she said. “A bunch of Chinese and Russians were caught-out big time moving mega bucks out of the country. They were

flushing cash through the Crown Casino banking system by the truckload. They worked a scheme where they deposited their enormous cash “*winnings*” into their account at the casino and then transferred it onward to bank accounts in all sorts of weird little countries. By then the money was all nicely washed and clean. The word is that it was had to be drug money. None of the regulators seemed to have a clue as to what had been going on until it became too obvious to cover up any longer.” Gawler said. “Yeah, I believe there has been quite a lot of cocaine coming into the country for a while now.”

Natasha thought, “Sam’s not too bad at the understatement,”.

As they strolled to the bank of lifts serving the apartments Gawler said. “I’ve never been the slightest bit interested in Crown casino. It is a seedy outfit. I think it’s a blight on the neighbourhood around here. We’ve got billionaires jetting into the country from Asia and Europe in the casino’s fleet of private aircraft on junkets sponsored by the casino. The Casino is owned by the richest guy in the country. The rich Junketers are addicted gamblers. They blow their money without a care for what is happening back home where millions of people are down to the bones of their arse scratching out a living in the steel mills and sweat shops producing stuff mostly for places like Australia.

And the local punters from the outer suburbs of Melbourne roll up in their thousands to the casino to throw their money into the poker machines thinking they can actually win some money. Usually, they end up broke and miserable stumbling out of the place wandering dazed

along the river promenade just outside trying to figure out what had just gone wrong in their lives.

“Cheer up Sam,” Natasha said. “Let’s work off some of your misery upstairs in the gym.”

They stepped into a lift and Sam pressed the button for the fifty sixth floor. The lift stopped at the tenth floor which Natasha saw housed the gymnasium and pool. A lithe, shapely young brunette stepped into the lift. Her outfit left nothing to the imagination. She broke into a huge grin when she spotted Sam. “Hi Bonnie,” he said. She wrapped her arms around him and enthusiastically leaned in pushing her body against him causing him to sway backwards until he was pressed back against the lift wall. Natasha thought, *“Bonnie is acting as if they were the only two people in the lift.”* Still holding him close Bonnie said, “Where the hell have you been Sam. You just went away one day and disappeared on me.” He said, “Work, Bonnie, you know how it is.” Natasha thought, *“her arms are like octopuses’ tentacles, Sam seems to be a little embarrassed, well so he should be.”* Sam broke free from Bonnie’s arms and said, “this is my colleague, Natasha.” Bonnie glanced at Natasha and turned back to Sam whispering, “how could you leave me just like that, you beast Sam?” As she got out of the lift at her floor she said, “I do hope we can catch up again soon Sam.”

Natasha thought *“Sam seems to be super friendly with some of the women around here. But he has always been giving me the impression that he hasn’t been near a woman since his wife died. Maybe I’m imagining things about Sam and these women that are not as real as they appear. Perhaps he regarded these women*

as just a sort of casual fling and he had no emotional commitment with them.”

Natasha was swept away by Gawler’s Southbank apartment. It was as sumptuous as he had described. Lush furnishings, floor to ceiling windows in every room with views from the main living room out across Port Phillip Bay. They could see several freight ships anchored in the bay waiting for clearance to enter the docks.

He showed her around the apartment building. It featured a large well-equipped gym and heated pool. There was a fancy restaurant on the top floor. The staff at the building welcomed Gawler home. They seemed to know him well. He introduced her to the building managers, the other concierges, the security people, and the cleaners.

Gawler had arranged for a technician to install a powerful telescope in the living room fitted with a smart camera. The camera was programmed to focus on any ship in the bay and detect abnormal activity by anyone getting close to the hull which would trigger an alarm. He said they would be paying close attention to the hull of the Ocean Outback when it arrived.

They bumped into a neighbour in the hallway opposite Gawler’s apartment, John Kanzius. “Hi John” Gawler said. “I’d like you to meet my colleague, Natasha. “Wow smashing,” John breathed quietly to himself. He caught himself and said, “By the way, that little black cat you left with me when you went away is doing okay. She seemed morose for a while, just listless, seemed to be missing you. Whenever I came in the door she sat staring at the door.

She seemed to be expecting you to be coming through the door behind me. But she has settled down. Now she is my special little buddy.” Gawler said. “I hope I can catch up with her while we are here.”

John told them he had been busy. He said he had invented a cure for cancer which the cancer “empire” had missed. He said he had a theory that radio waves would destroy cancer cells. He had constructed a machine in his garage out of used pie tins. Sure enough when the bottom of a pork sausage was shot with radio waves it cooked, but the top remained cool. He said he had passed his findings onto several university laboratories which reported back to him that they were very interested.

After they said goodbye to John, Natasha whispered “fascinating neighbours.”

CHAPTER 30

Gawler told Natasha that he believed the Russian gangsters in Buckleboo Creek been virtually wiped out. They had departed town. The information he had was that word had soon spread in the Australian criminal world that the Russians had decamped from Buckleboo Creek and the stolen gold was on its way to Melbourne hidden somewhere on the Ocean Outback.

Gawler said that he expected that tentacles of the Russian consortium would try and retrieve the gold when the ship arrived in Melbourne. But he knew a number of feuding gangs in the city had other ideas. They would set out firstly to eliminate the few Russian Gangsters remaining in Melbourne and then attempt to seize the gold.

A vicious gang war had already erupted. It was played out nightly on the television news. The Melbourne criminal gangs had united basically to take down the Russians. But their unified approach quickly degenerated into hostility and then a war between the gangs. They had many old grievances to settle. Commencing from the day Gawler and Natasha arrived in Melbourne, underworld identities

were being killed more frequently in the streets and in their homes.

Natasha was looking up on-line restaurant reviews. She suggested to Gawler that a restaurant, La Porcella, on Rathdowne Street in Carlton seemed like a great place for a meal.

It was a cosy restaurant, popular with the Carlton crowd, friendly waitresses, reputed to serve excellent pizza. They chose a table by the front window and ordered coffee while they looked over the menu. The waitress told them it was a quiet lunchtime today.

It was easy to spot Mick Gatto outside on the street. He was a notorious member of the Melbourne underworld. They saw him approaching the restaurant. A huge, formidable figure, walking like he owned the street, tugging ostentatiously at the lapels of his black suit and letting the fabric fall over his imposing figure. Gawler had read in the news that Gatto classed himself as an industrial mediator. He would tell his clients that for a price everything was negotiable between gentlemen.

Gatto entered the restaurant and was soon joined by Benji Veniamin, A dangerous looking heavily tattooed 28-year-old hitman. He was dressed very casually in cut-down jeans, tee shirt and heavy work boots.

Gawler told Natasha that his information was that it was well known in criminal circles that Benji was the chief suspect in five gangland murders. He had blown away two of his best friends Dino Dibra and Paul Kallipolitis over drug deals gone wrong.

It was obvious that Benji and Gatto had business to

discuss. Gawler and Natasha watched as Benji and Gatto ordered pizza and got straight down to business. They could hear them growling at each other. Gatto said.” I’ve got to be careful of you.”

Benji said” You’re a mate of mine what are you talking about.”

Gatto said. “Well, you know, I’m talking about Paul and Dino – they were your mates too. You grew up with them.”

Benji said.” Mick, they were dogs ...I’m dirty, they deserved it, they were definitely filthy.”

Gatto told Benji he thought it was a good time to bust up their friendship because he no longer trusted him. Gatto was looking closely at Veniamin. Fury had now engulfed Benji’s face. He looked hot in the cheeks, he bared his teeth, his eyes were wide open bulging, and his voice had become a high-pitched whine. They stepped into the pantry at the back of the restaurant to talk things over.

Alone with Gatto in the confined pantry Veniamin went off about rumours that he had killed “The Munster”, a friend of Gatto’s who had been shot last week. He yelled “We had to kill Munster and you too.”

Gawler and Natasha could hear them shouting. They could see them through the open pantry entrance. Gatto who was packing a gun, never saw where Benji’s gun came from, but he only had a second to act. He lunged at Benji and grabbed his arm. The gun went off sending a bullet past Gatto’s head. What happened next was a desperate struggle for survival.

Benji had his hands on the trigger. Gatto squeezed

his hands forcing Benji to pull the trigger. Bullets were embedding themselves in the walls of the restaurant. The waitresses fled out into the back lane. Gatto pushed the gun towards Benji who pulled him off balance causing Gatto to fall on top of him. The gun went off again twice. Two shots entered the back of Benji's head.

Benji Veniamin lay on his back on the floor of the restaurant coughing and spluttering blood. Sirens could be heard approaching.

Mick Gatto decided to decamp. As he headed for the door Gatto yelled to Gawler and Natasha, "You saw that. He died because he just pulled a gun on me."

Natasha said she no longer felt like eating pizza and wanted out of the place.

They stepped outside onto the footpath and caught a passing taxi back to Gawler's apartment where they decided to clear their heads by going for a workout in the gym.

CHAPTER 31

The early morning television news was running the story of Benji Veniamin's demise. Details were announced of plans for an underworld extravaganza funeral at St Andrews Greek Orthodox Church in Sunshine followed by a burial in a gold-plated coffin at the most extravagant grave ever seen at Keilor Cemetery. The arrangements were being organised by Carl "baby face" Williams. Benji had been "baby face's" bodyguard and was rumoured to be actually going after Mick Gatto on his behalf.

Two other underworld deaths had occurred overnight. Milorad Dapcevic went missing from the Dome Nightclub in South Yarra where he had gone for a routine night out with friends. His mutilated remains were found at Koonya beach near Frankston together with body of Charles "Mad Charlie" Hegyaljie.

Gawler said to Natasha." It looks as though the elimination of the Russian Crime Syndicate and their associates in Melbourne by the local drug gangs is gathering pace."

The Ocean Outback was due to arrive in Melbourne to unload the sheep destined for the abattoir in Colac and

to take on a load of camels bound for Saudi Arabia where the gold in the ship's sea chest was to be collected by the international drug dealing consortium. Gawler was keeping a constant watch on the shipping movements on the bay.

Gawler and Natasha spent a lazy day watching the Australian Open tennis at the nearby National Tennis Centre followed by an evening at the opera at the Melbourne Arts Centre.

The alarm on the smart camera sounded early next morning. The Ocean Outback had arrived overnight and without delay was receiving attention from a group of men who had arrived alongside the hull in a speedboat. One was equipped with scuba diving gear. Gawler and Natasha watched as the two body bags of gold were hauled into the speed boat. They jumped into a taxi at the rank outside the apartment building and made a very fast trip to Port Melbourne docks. They arrived as the body bags were being transferred by three big thuggish biker type guys from the speed boat into a sinister looking black van. Two Harley Davidson motorcycles with leather studded Bikers were parked nearby ready to escort the van.

They directed the taxi driver to trail at least four car lengths behind the van through the inner-city traffic. Trams, trucks cars and buses gave them good cover. It was a short journey to a dark narrow lane in inner city Brunswick. The van stopped outside a fortified dingy looking concrete building. A small sign on the front said Gold Stackers Smelting.

Two more bikers were waiting outside the building. The four bikers formed a cordon around the van as the

thuggish guys carried the body bags into the building. Gawler and Natasha paid off the taxi and strolled down the lane past the gold smelting building. Their presence was closely watched by the gangster bikers who were standing guard outside the building.

At the end of the lane, they turned into Lygon Street, a larger thoroughfare with a lot of traffic. They found a nearby coffee shop called the Red Rose. The staff looked like university part timers, young, ultra-casual, scruffy, tattooed, friendly.

Natasha took a deep breath and relaxed as they sat at a table near the window. She said she had been spooked going down that lane with the bikers and gangsters watching them.

Gawler said. "It seems that the Russians are still controlling the gold. Apparently they are getting the gold-sand smelted into ingots which would be negotiable anywhere in the world. Gold-sand in test tubes would be not so negotiable. The local gangsters would be looking for the gold, but they probably did not yet know what the Russians were doing. The Russians would need to quickly get the freshly smelted gold ingots back onto the Ocean Outback before it departs. The Russian criminal consortium had planned for its safe shipment to Saudi Arabia. They have probably planned to do a turnaround of sand to ingots overnight."

As the black van drove away, the four bikers stationed themselves on watch outside the Gold Stacker's building.

Next morning the television news reported that there

had been a drive-by shooting in the early hours outside “Bubbles” nightclub next door to the Red Rose Café in Brunswick. Natasha said. “ That’s the café where we had been relaxing last evening.” Four people standing outside the night club had been mowed down by shooters from an unidentified car which had sped away. It was reported on the news that the men had been working nearby and had taken a break at a quiet time in the early hours of the morning to visit the night club. The victims were Grado Manella, Richard Mladenich, Paul Kallipolitis and Mario Condello.

Natasha said the images of the four victims looked very much like the bikers they had seen yesterday working as guards outside Gold Stackers. In an interview, a Homicide squad detective said the men were known to the police. He said investigations were underway to determine whether the killings were related to an ongoing gang war.

Gawler and Natasha decided on a slap-up breakfast at Pure South, a restaurant downstairs from the apartment building. The restaurant had a brightly lit spacious open plan dining area with an island bench type rectangular serving area in the centre. In the front were large open windows opening to Riverside Promenade. Throngs of early morning strollers were passing by. The restaurant claimed to specialise in fresh produce air freighted daily from Tasmania and nearby islands.

They perused the menu. Gawler chose the Big Brekkie -poached eggs, Scottsdale rare-breed bacon, mushrooms, avocado, tomato relish on toasted sourdough.

Natasha went for the oyster mushrooms with eggplant sambal, spinach, poached egg on olive plus rosemary bread.

News of the pending arrival of the Ocean Outback had hit the local news media. Gawler and Natasha spread the Age newspaper in front of them on the breakfast table. A headlined article said Australia would begin exporting thousands of live camels to the Middle East following the introduction into service of a new purpose-built shipping vessel, the Ocean Outback.

The article said the ship had been converted by one of Saudi Arabia's wealthiest businessmen. It was due to arrive in Port Melbourne after being launched recently in Singapore. "The ship features super-sized doorways and two decks designed for adult camels." The article said. The item stated that a businessman, Hamood al Khalaf, made the investment after learning that thousands of feral camels were being shot in Australia because of environmental damage in the outback.

"The Federal Government had culled about 160,000 camels over four years as part of a \$19 million program that ended last year. "The feral camel population was estimated at one million at the start of the cull. "Livestock Export director Graham Daws said the trade in camels had been held back by the lack of a purpose-built vessel. "It is very exciting," he said. "There is a whole new business there."

"Mr Khalaf had spent \$50 million converting the Ocean Outback for sheep, cattle and camel exports and on associated infrastructure in Australia and Saudi Arabia. "Mr Khalaf had now chartered the vessel for camel shipments to the

Middle East, following a breakthrough agreement between Saudi Arabia and Australia to reopen live exports.”

Gawler said he had heard overnight from head office in London some news about the drug cartels: “There seems to be a Mafia war going on in Europe and we are caught up in it here in Melbourne. The gold being shipped from Melbourne to Saudi Arabia on the Ocean Outback could be well be part of the mafia war.”

Gawler’s neighbour, John Kanzius stepped into the restaurant. He spotted them and joined them at their table. Gawler asked him, “Have you heard anything about the Mafia war that seems to be hotting up around here?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, “I’ve been keeping up to date through my relatives overseas.”

He said, “Two powerful Mafia clans with headquarters in the Montenegrin port city of Kotor went to the mattresses six years ago. An uncounted number of people—well into the hundreds— have since died or disappeared.

“The war reached Western Europe several years ago. Recently two men were found dead in the northern German state of Brandenburg. A Montenegrin mafioso was shot and killed in front of a Viennese schnitzel restaurant.”

John said, “even Montenegro’s thick prison walls offered no protection. A sniper in the hills above the prison blew away a 34-year-old drug trafficker belonging to one of the mafia clans while he was taking an evening walk in the prison yard.

He said. “It seems that now the war has reached Melbourne. “Not much is understood yet but what the cops seem to know for sure, is that the Russian Oligarchs

and the Mafia and the Cabal are now firmly in control and are calling the shots. “Some people are saying the world will be changed according to the whims of Putin and the Oligarchs.

“The Authorities in Saudi Arabia just foiled a plot to smuggle 1.8 million amphetamine tablets hidden in spice containers into the Kingdom, the country’s latest drug-related crime.

And two Syrian residents who were the intended recipients of the drugs were arrested in Jeddah.

Gawler said people are asking; “What is really going on? Have Putin and the Russian Oligarchs masterminded everything? Do they now hold the key to the future? Is there a massive ‘deal’ in the works, where Russia takes back its lost ‘states’, like Ukraine? And does Israel get a final ‘deal’ for the West Bank, all masterminded by Russian Oligarchs? What is really going on?”

John said, “Only time can answer those questions of yours my friend.”

After breakfast Gawler and Natasha went for a workout at the gym. They were joined as they entered the gym by Michael, a tall slim very fit looking Chinese guy – clearly gay. Gawler nudged Natasha and muttered in an aside, “This guy is a wealthy banker with connections at Crown Casino.” Gawler and Michael greeted each other warmly. They seemed to have a lot to catch up on.

Listening to them talk, Natasha sensed that they seemed to exude a sense of male competition, like preening male peacocks or even the Adonis complex. They seemed to her

to be more visually oriented than women she knew. They were subtly competing with one another like males in the animal kingdom. She mused, *“how many times have I seen couples where one partner has the money, and the other partner has the looks? It can be a source of competition or even resentment of what the other has that he lacks. Each of them wants to make themselves attractive to the other, but also wants to be recognized and admired in his own right.”*

Natasha mused, *“But is there is such a thing as a reasonable or healthy narcissism?”*

Listening to them chat, Natasha got the impression that Gawler and Michael worked out together, *“maybe they served as each other’s stylists, and debated the latest, most effective grooming products.”* She thought, *“sometimes male culture is one big relentless beauty contest. I know it can provoke eating disorders and sometimes steroid abuse.”*

She was in a dilemma about how she could relate to Gawler’s now obvious dual sexual orientation. She had been pondering this issue for some time, since she had seen how he related to Dennis. *“Am I comfortable with it? Should I tackle him head-on about it? Will I never be exclusive with him? Will I always be just one in a crowd of his admirers, male and female? If I interrogate him about it, will I lose him?”* She was in a quandary and moved away from Michael and Gawler to carry on with her work-out. *I feel so alone when Gawler is acting like this. I just don’t know how to handle it.”*

Later that morning the smart camera in Gawler's apartment sounded the alarm. The speed boat was back alongside the hull of the Ocean Outback. The scuba diver was busy. Gawler and Natasha watched as the heavy gold ingot filled body bags were returned to the Ocean Outback's Sea chest.

"We need to act fast now" Gawler said. He made couple of phone calls and Natasha called Oleg.

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CHAPTER 32

They rushed by taxi to St Kilda jetty. They were met by the same technician who had installed the telescope and smart camera in Gawler's apartment. This time he was wheeling a large timber crate. Oleg was at the jetty with Natasha's father who had moored his fishing boat nearby. He had his fishing gear and bait ready for action. They headed out into the bay towards the Ocean Outback and anchored fifty metres away from the ship. They set up the fishing gear and cast their lines. But getting a nibble from a fish was not their top priority at this moment.

The technician withdrew an under-water drone from his wooden crate. It was controlled through a two-hundred-metre-long electronic cable operated from the fishing boat.

The technician lowered the drone into the water. It was now invisible from above the surface. Using his video controller, he powered the drone to the hull of the Ocean Outback. He quickly located the sea chest and using the drone's retractable claws he removed one of the body bags. He then steered the drone to another nearby ship which was also anchored waiting for clearance to dock at the port. This ship was the Maehurst Madrid, a container freighter.

It was scheduled to load a cargo of containers the following day. According to the published shipping schedule Gawler was perusing on his mobile phone, this ship was destined for Singapore.

The technician stored the body bag in the ship's sea chest of the Maehurst Madrid and returned for the second body bag which he then also secured inside the ship's sea chest.

Gawler yelled, "Job well done; Mission accomplished.

"At last, we have seized control of the gold away from the Russian drug traffickers and their associates. Neither the Russian drug consortium nor the Melbourne drug gangs will have the faintest idea of what has happened. They will undoubtedly keep fighting each other over the gold but there can be no winner."

Gawler had his phone in his hand. He said he now needed to speak with his sponsors in London James Wallbridge. He said he would ask James to urgently organise talks between Consolidated Rutile and management at the highest level of the company which owned the Maehurst Madrid to arrange for the insertion of Natasha and himself on board Maehurst Madrid as passengers.

Gawler said. "While we are on board, we can keep a watchful eye for anything that could imperil the storage of the hidden gold during the journey to Singapore. Once the ship arrives in Singapore, we can supervise the removal of the gold from the sea chest on the ship and its subsequent deposit into the corporation's bank account."

Gawler said, "Consolidated Rutile is a major customer of many shipping companies." He was of the view that

the arrangement for their inclusion on board as passengers should be a straightforward negotiation.

James soon returned Gawler's call. He said everything had been fixed with Maehurst Maritime Inc, the owners of the ship. Gawler and Natasha would travel as civilian passengers to Singapore departing sometime tomorrow after completion of the loading of a consignment of containers. They gave up on the notion that they might catch some fish. The retrieved the drone and stored it on the little fishing boat. Unfortunately, no fish seemed to be biting today. Natasha's father powered the boat back to StKilda jetty.

Gawler wanted to get to know Natasha's father. They all went back to the apartment for a get-together celebration. It would also be a farewell party. Natasha and Gawler would be departing the following day for a short trip to Singapore.

The following morning the television news reported that the Melbourne gang war had continued unabated overnight.

Alphonse Gangitano 40 had been shot dead in the laundry of his Templestowe home.

Bankrupt fruiterer, Joseph Quadafa, 57 was gunned down in a supermarket car park.

Kickboxer and hot dog dealer Michael Marshal was shot in front of his five-year-old son after stepping out of his car outside his South Yarra home. Housam Zayat, 32

was forced from his car and shot dead in a paddock near Werribee.

Gawler said to Natasha. “Listening to the European names of these now deceased gentlemen I think we can assume that they were connected with the Russian drug consortium.

Gawler and Natasha took a taxi to the Port Melbourne docks where they boarded the container ship, the Maehurst Madrid.

From the outset the ship was a disappointment. Natasha said that to her it looked like a decrepit old rust bucket. Waiting to greet them as they boarded were the ship’s captain and his wife.

With his square chin and salt-and-pepper hair, forty-three-year-old Donald deSouza had the appearance of a meticulous master. He struck a commanding presence.

His wife Amanda was a glamorous Indian princess type. She dressed in a typically colourful Indian sari. She appeared to be about ten years younger than Donald. They said she was travelling with him on this voyage to keep him company.

Life on board the ship became complicated for Gawler. He was smitten with Amanda from the outset. He started to spend a lot of time alone with her. Gawler was fighting himself to control his attraction to Amanda. He was openly flirting with her. It soon became blatant. He began juggling a relationship with Donald and Amanda while keeping Natasha at arm’s length. He was cheating on Natasha.

Donald didn’t seem to care much or even notice what

was happening between Amanda and Sam. But Natasha noticed. What Sam was doing was blatantly obvious. She thought Donald was even covertly encouraging them.

Natasha became furious. One night she angrily told Gawler she knew what was going on. He lied and denied it.

Captain deSouza's life on board was intense. His was twenty-four hour seven days a week job. It seemed to Amanda that he was either flat out running things on the bridge, looking into issues in the engine room or attending to paperwork in his stateroom. Amanda resented that most of the time she was left to her own devices on the ship and there was not so much that could keep her occupied. She had joined Donald on this voyage because he said he wanted her to keep him company, but it seemed to her that most of the time he wasn't really interested in spending time with her.

And Gawler was now on board. He fascinated her. They began spending a little time together. It escalated. They were spending a lot of time together. Amanda became infatuated. She told him on a balmy night after she had downed a few strong drinks, "I wish I would have met you a few years ago. When I still had my whole life ahead of me. Maybe things would have been different," she said, "but it's now that our paths cross. And it's today that we can write for tomorrow."

"I don't want to hurt you. I'm petrified by this idea," he whispered.

She said, "I truly believe that life puts people on our path who we need to help us, support us, love us and maybe even leave us as well. "You are the man who made me feel

alive again. The man who awoke the desire in me to build, this desire to create, a home, a family

“Thanks to you, I’m now this swallow able to fly again. This swallow looking for her nest. But this swallow, that had to regain her freedom.

But perhaps you couldn’t save me. Perhaps in fact, no one could. I understood I don’t need to be saved or carried. I am the master of my own destiny on board.

At sea, it’s all about uncertainties. The only thing you can handle is, hope.

Is it a life where you’re scared every day when you open your eyes? I know this love relationship of ours sent me back to that fear of being abandoned again by losing a loved one.

I forgot myself because of your fascinating personality and most of all your body. I am always staying behind you, waiting for you to authorize me to exist. But I think too much admiration would cause us a lot of suffering when we get back on land and we must part.”

CHAPTER 33

Natasha was pacing in circles around their tiny cabin. Clearly distressed and fuming with disappointment. She was berating Gawler. He was sitting with his elbows resting on the small dining table looking down at the tabletop with his head in his hands. He was listening, silent, defiant, unsympathetic.

Natasha said, “I realized quite a while ago that if I wanted you, I would have to put up with you running off to shag every trollop and poofter who crossed your bows like a randy old goat. Well, I did put up with you because I loved you and hated the thought of losing you. But now you have pushed me too far and you say you are sick of me. You are dumping me for that little floozy. I never thought you could be so cruel. “Last night you said to me:” ‘I will never forgive you. I don’t love you anymore. I will never make love with you again.’

Natasha said, “Suddenly I felt trapped in a bad nightmare.

“At this moment I do not feel much anger. My overwhelming feeling is sadness and mourning, as if you had suddenly died or our love had crashed in a freak accident.

What did I do to be to be punished like this?

What nerve did I touch?

“Our love, the fuel that kept us going through the traumas we have experienced together, without ever looking back, our bodies irresistible to each other. Sex and fighting and making up. I hope that tomorrow your mood will shift, and we might be filled with tenderness or fatigue and at noon maybe it will be peace. How did I do you wrong?”

You said I am so passive aggressive. “Don’t think I am oblivious to that” you said. “I know I say, it’s because I love you.

I am like a lightweight boxer in the ring, taking the punishment, taking it and taking it but still standing on her feet. They say those kinds of boxers have heart. I have a lot of heart.

I think of us lying naked on the bed, holding each other, the easy companionship of bodies that know how to make one another come and come. I believe in our relationship. I believe that we still have this thing. That deep down you still have it for me. I asked you if you have it. “Maybe” you said brutally, “but I don’t feel it.”

Something has changed between us; you have pulled the plug. “I’ve had it” you said. “We were caught in some vicious taunting cat and mouse game and now the jig is up.”

“You see yourself in a story as the hero who needs to spread his wings and free himself, test himself, renew himself. The hero flees. But the heroine returns to him. “I hear you. You’ve been wounded, you need space. But so do I.”

“Your story leaves me no room at all, no other option

than to accept the ritual killing of me so that the liberated hero can fly off on his own. But all I know is that I am not going to play the part you have assigned me.

“I asked you if there was something else going on in your life. It was an oblique question. I didn’t have the nerve to ask you point blank “are you fucking Amanda?” You are often missing together somewhere on the ship.

We sometimes have an early dinner in our cabin because you are “going out.” This is the new code word. We both know what it means. You talk about it coyly. I don’t know how many more times I can take it, seeing you “go out” to fuck Amanda.

For me to imagine you involved with Amanda was unthinkable. Because you and me, we’ve been everything together. We’ve had the relationship that everyone dreams of.

You are humiliating me, you know that. You’re supposed to be a tough guy. What a wuss. So, you don’t fuck me, that’s my punishment. Let’s see how long that’s going to last.

How dare you reject me. You’re killing me. You’re killing our love, our passion. And for what? For her? Don’t you see you’re destroying a part of yourself too?”

Deep down we trusted each other. There was an unspoken agreement that We were in it for the long haul, together no matter what the conflicts. But now things are different. Something has happened. How can I believe a word of what you say? “Are you as treacherous towards her as you are toward me? I could forgive you for your betrayal, but you are not asking for my forgiveness.

When we made love last night, I thought it would be the for the last time, it was as if you were going to war. My face was pressed against your cheek, and I held back the tears. “I’ll miss you” I said into your neck. “I’ll miss you so much.”

You didn’t say anything.

“What do you feel about me”? I asked you.

“I don’t know”. You said.

A little while later I asked you again.

“Are you sad to break up like this?”

“I am horribly sad,” you said, and you sounded desperate.”

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CHAPTER 34

Natasha was furious. She was quivering, crying and distraught from the bust up with Gawler. She stepped out of their cabin onto the outside walkway running along the deck. She was wearing sandals, jean shorts and a tee shirt. She spotted Amanda approaching the cabin dressed in a sports bra and running shorts.

“So, you’ve come for some more of Sam,” she shouted. “Well, try some more of me you slutty bitch.” Natasha launched at her, grabbing her by her beautiful long black hair pulling hard and swinging her off balance. Amanda pulled free. Her immediate response was to crouch into a fighter’s stance. She jabbed at Natasha who dodged and punched her in the stomach. Natasha was quick but Amanda caught her in the left temple with a short jab which momentarily stunned her.

Amanda pitched forward and fell on top of her. Natasha wrapped her arms around her, spun and got on top of her leaving her with no escape path.

They wrestled and clawed at each other. Natasha rolled out of Amanda’s reach. They were both gasping for breath and hurting as they staggered to their feet. Natasha

pummelled Amanda's head into a post. She grabbed Amanda by her leg and dragged her against the bulkhead. Amanda had lost her top in the melee. Natasha hooked at her pants with her foot and ripped them off. Amanda was now naked; her smooth brown skin was glistening with perspiration.

Natasha was standing in the centre of the walkway with her back to the water readying to give Amanda a final pummelling. In a last burst of strength, Amanda charged heavily against Natasha. The impact sent Natasha sprawling backwards flinging her against the gate in the safety railing for the pilot's ladder. The force of the impact snapped the gate from its rusted hinges.

The damaged gate offered no resistance to Natasha's backwards trajectory. It disappeared overboard leaving a gap in the safety railing and Natasha tumbled backwards through the opening. She disappeared noiselessly into the foaming waves below.

Amanda was bruised and bleeding from multiple scratches and gashes. Her muscles were hurting all over. She staggered to the safety railing and stared into the ship's wake. But Natasha had disappeared. The struggle had begun and was all over in just short of two of minutes. Other than the two combatants nobody had been present. Natasha had mysteriously disappeared, but her absence would not be noticed for some time.

Everyone on board had become distracted by events in the ocean unfolding around the ship. Increased pirate activity in the region had generated seven alerts in recent days to the Maehurst Madrid.

CHAPTER 35

Captain, Donald deSouza was well aware of the alerts but had refused the crew's pleas to sail further away from the coast. They were presently two hundred and forty nautical miles from the coast.

The Maehurst Shipping Company always operated with an on-board anti-piracy plan but Jake Patterson, the Third Mate said deSouza was ignoring the anti-piracy plan. He said "deSouza has a laissez faire attitude towards pirates."

He said every captain knew the company' anti- piracy plan had stipulated that they should stay at least 600 nautical miles away from the coast.

But deSouza said to the officers on the bridge that the route the ship was taking was always in pirate areas. He told them " Even if we stayed say 800 kilometres out, there would be no time when we would be outside the pirate areas."

Patterson, said to the chief engineer. "If something is not deSouza's idea he is not going to do it. You can only try to talk about it until he thinks it is his idea," he said. Patterson said that the best way to avoid an attack was to stop the pirates boarding the ship in the first place. "If

pirates did make it onboard then we needed ways to stop them controlling the ship,” he said.

The Maehurst Shipping Company also had a long-standing policy forbidding crew members from holding personal arms on their ships. The company did not employ contracted armed guards on their ships.

Inside the ship’s engine room an unused small compartment had previously been converted into a reinforced safe room that could be locked from the inside. The room had been specifically constructed after pirate activity had become prevalent.

The afternoon sun was blazing. The sea was rough. De Souza was leading the crew in a lifeboat drill when they spotted four groups of men in small wooden skiffs bobbing around on the rough sea. According to the second assistant engineer, Matt Dixon, de Souza was a stickler for drills and safety.

When the skiffs began to pursue the Maehurst Madrid. Dixon asked, “why are we completing the drill rather than activating the anti-piracy plan?” He got no answer.

The large waves deterred all but one of the skiffs. which also eventually gave up the chase.

At 3.45 am the following morning the solitary skiff reappeared on the ship’s radar. The sea was flat glass. Captain deSouza ordered an increase in speed. The skiff fell back before dropping off the radar altogether.

At 6.48 am, another skiff with an outboard motor reappeared carrying four men armed with AK47 rifles. They were clearly pirates but no mother ship was in sight

Dixon said: “They are close and coming fast, I can

see them with the naked eye. We are helpless. We are surrounded by 360 degrees of water, and no one is around to help.”

As they got closer the pirates fired on the ship. The crew were alerted by the ship’s security alarm.

Gawler came out of his cabin and grabbed a fire hose. He aimed the hose at the pirates as they tried to climb on board. Dixon stood beside Gawler and worked another hose. This did not stop the pirates. Gawler then fired flares at them but that did not stop them. Dixon said, “great work,” as Gawler shot off another flare and ducked as the pirates shot back at him.

Gawler and Dixon could see the pirates throwing grappling hooks up onto the ship’s lower deck. The pirates slung a ladder from the hooks and climbed onto the deck. They forgot to secure their skiff and it quickly drifted away.

Third mate Patterson activated the anti-piracy plan. He led fourteen of the crew including second mate Jessica Danforth and Captain deSouza’s wife Amanda down to the safe room. They were looking for the civilian passenger Natasha Timoshenko but, in their rush, to get to the safe room they had been unable to find her. Captain deSouza barricaded himself in his captain’s stateroom and tried to figure out what to do next.

A pirate was able to sneak past Gawler and Dixon by creeping along the deck below them. He climbed to the bridge and used his gun to shoot through the security chains and locks securing the access gate to the bridge. Unfortunately, deSouza had neglected to lock the bridge door. The pirate easily forced the door open. Jacobson

radioed an alert to Gawler and Dixon below; “the bridge is compromised; the bridge is compromised”. The chief of the pirates, a guy they heard the other pirates call Abdul, had appeared in front of Jacobson on the bridge. He fired two shots in the air and announced: “no problem, no problem, just business. Relax, not al-Quaida, not al-Quaida.”

At gunpoint he ordered Jacobson and the helmsman out of the bridge and forced them to rig a rope ladder down the side of the ship for the last two pirates still in the skiff.

Down in the engine room the chief engineer had acknowledged the alert and had taken over control of the ship. He was able to swing the rudder from side to side to try and stop the last two pirates from climbing up the ladder onto the ship. He failed to stop them, but the increased wake from the manoeuvre caused the pirate’s skiff to capsize.

Now the pirates were trapped on the ship.

The engineer shut off the engines, the electrical power and the emergency generator. Only the emergency batteries remained. They generated a distress signal. The ship became dark.

The engineer figured the pirates would be afraid to move around an unfamiliar ship in the dark.

On the bridge Jacobson convinced the pirates to summon assistance from their mother ship. He convinced them that without power the radio and radar did not work. He told them he was trying to help them get away from the ship.

Chief pirate Abdul demanded that Jacobsen fetch the crew. Jacobson broadcast messages calling the crew to

muster but he did not send the safety code word. Therefore, the crew ignored the call.

Gawler was concerned for the crew and Natasha who he believed was in the safety room. They would be suffering from the extreme heat. They had no food or water, and it would be getting hotter inside the room. The pirates began searching the ship for the crew.

Gawler and Dixon crept along the tunnels below deck normally used by the crew when it rained. Over the radio Jacobson said, “if they don’t see anyone in five minutes they are going to start shooting.”

Gawler and Dixon silently slipped through the door of the safe room and gathered a couple of the crew to collect some fruit and drinking water from the darkened engine room. He looked for Natasha in the room but did not spot her. Gawler then stationed himself in the shadows outside the room to guard the entrance. Around 11.00am two figures approached the engine room. It was the pirate Abdul with the helmsman guiding him.

The only weapon Gawler had was a pocketknife. It was sharp with a serrated hilt.

Abdul held a torch in his left hand. The beam flashed on Gawler. He lunged at the pirate and jabbed his right hand with the pocketknife at Abdul’s throat. Gawler assumed the pirate probably had a gun in his right-hand. Gawler grabbed and squeezed the pirate’s right wrist while he held the knife at his throat with his other hand. Abdul slashed his left hand at Gawler as he tried to keep the knife from his throat. Gawler then realized Abdul was not armed after all. The struggle caused Gawler to press the knife harder into

the pirate's throat. Gushing blood, Abdul started yelping in fear.

Gawler pushed him down onto the deck and called out to Dixon for help.

They tied his hands with some zip ties Dixon had grabbed earlier in the engine room.

“One down, “Dixon said over the radio.

In the Captain's quarters deSouza had been left tied-up and blindfolded after the pirates had smashed their way into the cabin past his puny barricades. They had found the unlocked ship's safe and had helped themselves to \$30,000. But the pirates had missed the captain's radio and his mobile phone.

Gawler released deSouza from his blindfolds and ties.

deSouza grabbed the radio and called, Mayday, Mayday. This is Maehurst Madrid- Panamanian flag ship with Filipino crew. We have been taken hostage by four pirates. Any vessels in the area come back on channel sixteen.

The pirates were listening to the same radio channel on the bridge, but they didn't know where the broadcast was coming from. The pirates now seemed calm and happy with their \$30,000 pay day.

Gawler and Dixon released the crew and Amanda from confinement in the safe room. They staggered out okay but suffering from heat stress. Gawler was worried now about Natasha. He hadn't seen her coming out of the room. He pondered “*Where the hell was she?*”

Negotiations on the bridge between the remaining three pirates and Jacobsen had reached a deal. The pirates had lost their skiff and were going to take a lifeboat, but

first they needed their leader Abdul back. They demanded the release of Abdul and the supply of a lifeboat to take the four of them back to land. The \$30,000 haul would satisfy them.

As agreed in the deal, a lifeboat was lowered. The three pirates descended on the pilot's ladder and climbed aboard. Abdul had been retained by Gawler as captive on board the Maehurst Madrid until the boarding onto the lifeboat of the other three pirates had been completed. As soon as Abdul climbed aboard the lifeboat the pirates yelled that they needed someone to show them how to operate the controls. Gawler volunteered. He descended the ladder into the lifeboat. As he was showing Abdul how to operate the controls Abdul gunned the engine and roared away from the ship. Now Gawler was the hostage.

Third Mate Jacobson took control of the Maehurst Madrid and pursued the little lifeboat. As night fell Jacobson and the Pirates talked back and forth by radio. Jacobson trying to persuade the pirates to release Gawler and the pirates refusing.

For the next three hours the enormous Maehurst Madrid pursued the small lifeboat cutting it off and forcing it to turn away from the coast from where the pirates may have been able to source assistance.

At about 1.00 am an American naval destroyer arrived on the scene. It was a large warship and carried helicopters.

A helicopter was quickly despatched to the lifeboat. It hovered closely above the tiny boat. Gawler grabbed his opportunity to get away from the pirates and jumped overboard. He jumped just in time as the downdraft from

the helicopter swamped the lifeboat with seawater. The little boat sank with the four pirates on board.

A cable was lowered from the helicopter with a rescue crewman. Gawler was hoisted into the helicopter which then returned him to the deck of the Maehurst Madrid.

As soon he was back aboard Maehurst Madrid Gawler went searching around the ship for Natasha. Although he had been emotionally hurt by their nasty break-up, he still felt strongly for her. He was frightened when she was nowhere to be seen. He spoke with deSouza.

"I'm worried about Natasha, he said. Surely, she wouldn't have fallen overboard or something like that during the pirates' attack?"

De Souza's tone when he responded to Gawler was icy cold. This was the brute who he knew had cuckolded him with Amanda. *Now this thug wants my sympathy, he mused. Well, he can just whistle for it.* "I Guess, if you have searched the ship and didn't find her then that must be what has probably happened," deSouza said. " But that was hours ago. We would have no hope of finding her now. I will put out an SOS person-overboard alert on all channels and hope for the best."

A response call came back two hours later from what seemed to be a Chinese fishing vessel. Squealing through heavy static, a voice in broken English seemed to be saying something about Shanghai. Then the channel dropped out.

The next stop for the Maehurst Madrid was Singapore. Gawler decided that after he had done his duty to Consolidated Rutile by supervising the unloading of the gold bullion from the ship's sea chest and deposited it into

the corporation's bank account in Singapore, he would travel to China and attempt the huge task of trying to trace Natasha, or at least to try find out whether she had survived.

Amanda had been avoiding him. He wondered; did she know something? He couldn't find her to get some answers to the puzzle. He felt spooked by Natasha's disappearance, haunted, lost. Was it suicide? If so, was he to blame? This was not the same feeling he had after losing Sarah to cancer. The devastation was the same but the emptiness, the chilling unknown factor, the horror of what might have happened was seeping slowly into his heart. In the meantime, while he counted down the days until the ship reached Singapore, it seemed all he could do was hope that Natasha had somehow survived.®

CHAPTER 36

The ship's second mate, Jessica Danforth squinted through the rain-splattered windows of the bridge as the container freighter, Maehurst Madrid, lunged upward sharply, then fell into the trough of a 20-metre-tall wave.

The skies were black. She stood on the navigation bridge high above the Maehurst Madrid's main deck, which spread out before her like an aircraft carrier stacked high with red, white and blue cargo containers.

News blurted through the bridge's radio speaker: Forecasters had named the storm Hurricane Stephanie as it built into a Category 3, with winds of 130 kph.

"Oh my God," she said to the helmsman standing nearby, bracing when the ship she called "the rust bucket" shuddered over another wave. "Can't pound your way through them waves. Break the ship in half," the helmsman said.

It was 1:15 a.m. and the Andaman Sea was boiling over. The Maehurst Madrid, sailing near Nicobar Islands off Malaysia was being knocked about by the strongest October storm to hit these waters since 1866. In the coming hours,

the Maehurst Madrid and its crew would fight desperately for survival.

Another wave slammed into them. “Oh shit,” said Jessica. “That was a bad one.” The alarm sounded. The ship was now pushed in another direction, off the captain’s chosen course. After a few tense seconds, the Maehurst Madrid righted herself. “She’s doing’ good. I’m impressed. Knock on wood,” said Jessica.

The Madrid was one of two container ships owned by Maehurst Maritime Inc. that navigated in constant rotation between Melbourne Australia and Singapore. It carried everything from milk to Mercedes Benzes. If the Madrid missed its run, store shelves sat empty, an economy suffered and Maehurst lost money.

This run was to be the Maehurst Madrid’s last before a major retrofit. Maritime Inspectors had found parts of the vessel’s boilers that were “*deteriorated severely*” and a service was scheduled in the next month. This came as no surprise: One Maritime inspector had identified a “*disturbing*” uptick in safety discrepancies during the Maehurst Madrid’s inspections over the previous two years. The Maritime Inspector was in the process of adding the 40-year-old ship to its “target list” of cargo vessels that needed a higher level of scrutiny.

To add to the danger, the Maehurst Madrid was equipped with open-top lifeboats like those used on the Titanic or Lusitania. Modern ships carry the round, tent-like lifeboats with electronic beacons that dramatically increase survival chances in a shipwreck.

Once, Jessica texted pictures of the MSC Madrid’s

lifeboats to her mom. “Is that your lifeboat? It’s open,” her mom replied, aghast. Her mom was a former sea farer and knew open lifeboats to be a thing of the past. “Let’s hope you never get into some rough seas,” she wrote, “because you know kid, you’re screwed.”

“Yes, I know,” Jessica replied. “Mom, if I ever die at sea, that’s where I want to be.”

Jessica Danforth had a cordial relationship with the captain of the Maehurst Madrid. She respected him but told her mother and friends she didn’t like de Souza’s dismissive attitude. The storm had been growing, so Jessica suggested they consider taking a longer, slower route south through the Old Adaman Channel.

But the captain had the final word on voyage planning, and he refused to deviate. She’d noticed the captain was sound asleep when she’d called. It rang a few times before he answered.

The ship was taking a beating, she’d said, but was holding course. The captain asked about the latest weather reports. He would return to the bridge in a few hours. She hung up the phone as the ship took on another huge wave.

“He said to run it. Hold on to your ass!” Jessica shouted. “Figured the captain would be up here,” the helmsman said.

Microphones on the bridge picked up their conversations, which were sent to a voyage data recorder, the ship’s “black box.” I thought so too. I’m surprised, “Jessica replied.

“Damn,” the helmsman said with disappointment. “He’ll play hero tomorrow,” he said laughing. The captain

would be praised for the ship making it through hurricane Stephanie to Singapore on time.

Even after a decade at sea, Jessica, 34, maintained a youthful air. Her round, freckled face was slightly weathered from the sun, and her dumb jokes endeared her to the 32 crewmates who relied on her skilful navigation. She stood only 163 centimetres, but her mariner toughness was displayed in the large anchor tattoo on her chest, which peeked over the neckline of the vintage '50s dresses she liked to wear on shore.

Gawler battled against the wind and rain as he clambered up the stairs to the bridge. He forced the door open wide enough for him to poke his head inside. He called to Jessica, "you guys doin okay here? Anything I can do to help?" Jessica called back, "We're doing the job we have trained for over the years; we'll pull through for sure." But if you want to help, I think the guys down in the engine room could do with another hand. I'm sure they will be doing it pretty tough down there right now."

Gawler said, okay then I'll go down and check things out down there." He climbed back down the stairs and made his way to the engine room.

Jessica was one of only three women on this cargo run. The others were a civilian passenger Natasha Timoshenko from Melbourne Australia and the captain's wife Amanda de Souza.

She had been raised in a military family whose motto was "suck it up," Jessica worked hard and asked few questions.

But now, she was helpless against the crushing waves, wind, and rain. “It would help if I knew which direction the swell was coming from,” Jessica said to the helmsman. “I could alter course a little more. I can’t see.”

They heard a massive thump from below in the bowels of the ship. The Maehurst Madrid carried heavy cargo in its interior holds: If that was a car or something else coming loose, it was a sailor-crushing danger.

“Whoooo!” Jessica exclaimed.

“Yeah, it’s starting to get a little bit more active around here,” the helmsman replied. The swelling seas shoved the Maehurst Madrid around like a cork.

Jessica could not know exactly how hard the wind was blowing. The Maehurst Madrid’s anemometer, or wind gauge, had been broken for years. To adapt, the sailors usually stepped out on deck to gauge wind speed the old-fashioned way, by checking the flap of the boat’s flags. That was impossible in the dark. Jessica scanned the radar for a fellow vessel in the area, but every other ship had diverted to avoid the storm. The Maehurst Madrid was alone.

“Hello, Hurricane Stephanie,” Jessica said to the storm. “It’s just getting bigger — our path is going right through it.”

At 3:34 a.m. deSouza emerged from his stateroom. Jessica greeted him, grateful for the chance to go down to her room for a quick rest. She’d found time to fire off a quick email to her mother. “We are heading straight into it, Category 3, last we checked. Winds are super bad. Love to everyone.”

Later that day, reading the email, Jessica’s mother knew something was wrong. Jessica never signed her emails,

“Love to everyone.” Her mother understood that her daughter was sending a coded message: I may never see you again.

Donald de Souza’s detached, hands-off style led Jessica and some others to describe the 43-year-old master as a “stateroom captain.” Stateroom captains didn’t get their hands dirty and weren’t seen a lot on deck. They didn’t share smokes and chit chat with the crew.

On the bridge, deSouza greeted Jessica’s replacement, chief mate Steve Smedhurst, and a fresh helmsman, Frank Handley. He set out to calm their nerves.

“There’s nothing bad about this ride,” the captain announced, despite the hurricane raging outside. “I was sleeping like a baby. This is every day in Africa,” the captain continued. No one could see out of the windows, except for when brief sparks of lightning illuminated the rain.

“A typical winter day off the southern coast of Africa.” Earlier in his career de Souza had navigated freighters in the Africa trade, known in the industry as one of the most bruising theatres of sailing. But his leadership had been questioned by Maehurst Shipping Corporation’s upper management, and after initially leaning toward offering de Souza the job heading one of its new ships the company decided to go in a different direction.

Now favoured were younger captains who could drive the new high-tech freighters. Before leaving port in Melbourne, deSouza expressed disappointment to colleagues that he hadn’t been chosen to command the

modern, liquefied natural gas-fuelled ship that was to replace the Maehurst Madrid.

The captain had been disappointed by the news, but he was a professional. Perhaps he thought he could show them that they'd made a mistake by making the Maehurst Madrid's cargo run on time, even with a major storm system in his way. deSouza knew what could happen to masters who raised safety concerns that weren't considered serious enough by the company. He had been fired by a prior employer after an incident with another ship. The steering was bad on that one, and he'd refused an order to take it to port, requiring the company to hire tugboats to drag it there instead.

The course alarm, which blared every time the ship deviated from its programmed route, was now ringing every few seconds as the seas flung the vessel around. The captain ordered it turned off, along with the auto-piloting system, nicknamed the "Iron Mike."

They would have to steer the ship manually, to use their human senses to feel the swell and winds, as they piloted blindly into the waves.

Containers the size of a Mack truck were breaking free from their chain lashings. They'd left port not expecting the heavy weather and didn't ask the longshoremen for extra storm lashes, the ship's third mate had said ruefully earlier in the day, as the storm worsened. Now, thrown off balance, the Maehurst Madrid tilted precariously to the right, or starboard, as it plunged into the pounding waves.

Unsure why his boat was listing, the captain searched for a solution. The steep angling of the ship was making it hard to stand up straight. If he knew the hurricane-force wind's direction — difficult to detect at night in a hurricane with a broken wind gauge — the helmsman could position the freighter so that the wind hit its left, port side, correcting the vessel's pitch.

Flooding in the cavern-like interior holds could be battled with pumps to redirect the water into other areas for balance. If the ship lost some of its 20-ton containers, he could use the pumps to help compensate for that, too.

None of that mattered without power, though. The captain called down to the engine room to check that the ship's boilers, its only source of power, were still operational. Without propulsion in a Category 3 storm, the Maehurst Madrid would be lost.

"How you guys doing down there?" he asked. Gawler replied. "The engineer says that they are 'blowing tubes,' or trying to remove obstructions from the engine as it started chugging".

The engineer took the mike and said there was another problem: he said the intake tube which sucked oil like a straw from a large tank into the engines was starting to lose contact with the oil due to the ship's tilt. Without oil, the engines would stop running altogether.

Standing with the captain on the bridge, chief mate Smedhurst noted the barometer readings were headed downward, which could indicate they were closer to

Hurricane Stephanie's eye. That ran counter to the storm track models de Souza had used — those showed the storm farther away. He still planned to outrun it.

“We won't be going through the eye,” the captain said: If they could skirt a bit further south, away from the eye toward Crooked Island, they would reach its backside more quickly.

With the ship tilting and oil pressure decreasing, the captain decided to use the wind to force the ship more upright. If he could do that, he could get oil pressure back and increase the ship's power. “Just steer that heading right there the best you can. That'll work for us,” the captain instructed Handley and Smedhurst.

The ship dropped down a three-story-tall swell. “Feel the pressure dropping in your ears just then? Feel that?” de Souza said, trying to make light of the situation.

Handley's large frame was bent over in fear at his console. Two days earlier, the 49-year-old father of five had called Rachele, his wife, just before he sailed out of range. He said everything was OK — Handley liked and trusted the captain, with whom he'd often worked.

But in the chaos of the storm, he had been unable to send his customary daily email home. “Take your time and relax,” de Souza said. Handley manage to find his breath, then took the helm back. “I am relaxed, Captain.” de Souza turned quickly to the ship's computer. He needed to check the Bon Voyage System, or BVS, an online subscription

weather forecasting tool, to get the latest hard data on Cyclone Stephanie.

“Hanging in there Frank?”

Smethurst said, trying to keep the jittery helmsman engaged as the captain scanned his email for the weather updates.

“Still got us on course. You’re doing great.”

The captain grew confused. Though the forecasting tool told him the storm was still farther north, clearly, they were right in it. “We’re getting conflicting reports as to where the centre of the storm is,” he said. de Souza didn’t know that there was a problem with the BVS system emails he was receiving: One update he’d received had storm tracking information that was 21 hours old. While he had access to other forecasts on the internet, de Souza relied on BVS. The storm they now faced was far more advanced than his weather models showed.

“Our biggest enemy here right now is we can’t see,” he said. He believed they were nearing the back side of the storm but had no way of knowing for sure. By overruling his crew’s suggested alternate routes, he had made a horrible mistake.

An engineer from below deck appeared on the bridge. Something wasn’t right. “I’ve never seen it list like this,” the engineer reported. The Maehurst Madrid’s steep list was not just from sliding shipping containers, the engineer reasoned — something else was to blame.

The phone rang with a call from the engine room. The

ship was losing oil pressure and needed to be righted now. “I’m trying to get her steadied up,” the captain replied.

Water surged over the ship’s stern, and the sound of the ocean pounding the old ship was deafening. Another electric ring of the telephone. deSouza answered, “Bridge, captain.” A moment passed and he turned to his chief mate: “We got a problem.” Water had started flooding one of the ship’s warehouse-sized holds used to store cars and other large containers. He ordered Smedhurst, a 54-year-old former Navy captain and seasoned mariner, below deck immediately to start pumping out the hold. It was a perilous assignment.

Any piece of heavy cargo afloat in the hold could easily pulverize Smedhurst.

The chief mate grabbed a walkie-talkie and climbed down from the bridge.

The captain took the ship’s helm from Handley. With water flooding inside Maehurst Madrid’s hold. He knew why he’d been unable to right the ship. He turned the steering wheel hard, trying to use the wind again — anything to decrease the ship’s angle.

Smedhurst radioed from down below, in the flooded cargo chamber. “About knee deep in here,” he said. ‘I think we just lost the plant’

At 6 a.m., Jessica came back to the bridge from her stateroom. She’d changed out of her work clothes and hadn’t changed back before coming up. She moved over to the dead radar screen — it’d gone dark, maybe from water

coming through a gap in one of the bridge's windows — to try and get the ship's current position. After a few minutes, the radar fluttered and suddenly blinked back to life. "All right, good," the captain said.

He ordered Jessica to sync the latest BVS weather models with their current position, still not realizing the data was hours old, and useless.

The ship groaned over yet another tall wave. "No," Jessica said, bracing. "There goes the lawn furniture."

"Let's hope that's all," said the captain.

Jessica wasn't supposed to be on the bridge, but de Souza didn't question her. "You want me to stay with you?" Jessica asked. "Please," the captain said. "It's just the ..." He couldn't finish his sentence.

Smedhurst called from the flooded hold again. He wanted the bridge to move the ship so the water below would shift to the other side.

All at once, a terrifying silence gripped them. The rumble and vibration of ship's engines ceased. The Maehurst Madrid was adrift.

"I think we just lost the plant," de Souza said. Somehow, he needed to balance the ship — an almost impossible feat without propulsion.

Down below, the whirring pumps continued to push thousands of litres a minute from the flooded holds. Up top, everyone had to use their leg muscles to stay standing on the angling ship. "Feeling those thighs burn?" Jessica asked Handley, as he dug in to turn the rudder.

Just after 7 a.m., de Souza picked up the ship's emergency satellite phone. He dialled the cell phone number of

Maehurst's designated person ashore, the only human in charge of knowing what was going on with the fleet. The call went to voicemail. de Souza rattled out a brief message, then called the company's answering service. A woman picked up with a pleasant hello.

"We had a hull breach; a scuttle blew open during a storm," de Souza explained tersely. "We have water down in three hold, with a heavy list.

We've lost the main propulsion unit; the engineers cannot get it going." He asked for her to patch him through to a TOTE official immediately.

"Can you please give me your satellite phone number and spell the name of the vessel?" she asked slowly. "Spell your name, please?"

TOTE safety officials had identified the answering service as a problem previously, but it had not been fixed.

"The clock is ticking" the captain said, his voice calm despite the chaos. He tried again. "This is a marine emergency, and I am trying to also notify management." He gave the operator his name and number and hung up.

Electronic alarms echoed throughout the steel freighter. Jessica read out their current position. The captain called down to the flooding hold. "Can you tell if it's decreasing or increasing?" he asked. "I can't tell captain.

Seems as if it's going down," the chief mate replied. He turned to Jessica. "Say second mate. How 'bout our range and bearing from like Nicobar Islands or whatever that island is there," he said, looking for any sign of land they might be able to reach.

He grabbed the Maehurst Madrid's emergency beacon that would aid rescuers in finding their position. The satellite phone rang, it was his boss. "Yeah, I'm real good," de Souza said matter-of-factly. "Three hold's got considerable amount of water in it.

Uh, we have a very, very healthy port list. The engineers cannot get lube oil pressure on the plant; therefore, we've got no main engine. And let me give you, um, a latitude and longitude. I just wanted to give you a heads up before I push that, push that button," he said, referring to the Ship Security Alert System, or SSAS, an emergency beacon. It was 7:07 a.m.

"The crew is safe," he said into the phone. "Right now we're trying to save the ship. But it's not getting any better. No one's panicking. Our safest bet is to stay with the ship during this particular time. The weather is ferocious out here." de Souza told his boss it was time to alert the Coast Guard.

"I want to wake everybody up," he said. "I just wanted to give you that courtesy, so you wouldn't be blindsided by it. Everybody's safe right now, we're in survival mode."

Jessica stood at the ready. "All right now, push the SSAS button," he commanded. "Roger," she said. "Wake everybody up. de Souza shouted. "We're gonna be good. We're gonna make it right here."

Chief Mate Smedhurst radioed from the flooded hold again. "I think the water level's rising captain," he said. He could think of nothing more to do.

"All right, chief," the captain replied. de Souza's tinny voice sounded over the ship's intercom ordering the crew

to muster. He wanted everyone accounted for. The high-frequency bell of the abandon ship alarm rang out.

“Can I get my vest?” Jessica asked.

“Yup, bring mine up too and bring one for Frank” the captain replied. The helmsman, a large man and diabetic, yelled out as Jessica left the bridge:

“I need two!”

“OK buddy, relax,” the captain said. The ship heaved, the tip of its bow sinking beneath the black water.

“Bow is down. Bow is down,” de Souza said over the ship intercom.

“Get into your rafts. Throw all your rafts in the water,” he yelled.

“Everybody. Everybody get off the ship. Stay together. Stay together” he screamed.

Handely was unable to move. “Cap, Cap,” he said.

“You gotta get up,” de Souza ordered. “You gotta snap out of it and we gotta get out!” he said, his voice firm, urgent.

“Help me!” Handely pleaded.

“Ya gotta get to safety!” the captain yelled. Handley couldn’t move.

The shrill beat of alarms continued as the ship’s tilt worsened.

The captain reached for Handley. “Don’t panic. Don’t panic,” he said. “Work your way up here. Don’t freeze up! Follow me,” he pleaded with Handley.

“I can’t! My feet are slipping! I’m going down!”

de Souza looked at his terrified helmsman. “You’re not going down. Come on, Come on” he yelled.

“You gonna leave me,” Handley cried.

“I’m not leaving you. Let’s go,” the captain responded.

I’m a goner” Handley screamed.

“No, you’re not” the captain replied.

The Maehurst Madrid’s bridge reared up as the ship sank deeper. “It’s time to come this way,” de Souza shouted, as the Maehurst Madrid slipped beneath the sea.

It would be months before search crews found the wreckage. The Maehurst Madrid had come to rest 2,000 metres down, on the seafloor near the Nicobar Islands. The bridge where Handley and de Souza struggled for survival had separated from the vessel’s hull and lay a kilometre away.

None of the bodies of the 28 people on board the Maehurst Madrid were recovered.

Among those listed as missing were Sam Gawler and Natasha Timoshenko both of Melbourne Australia. Relationship, unknown.

CHAPTER 37

Arthur Hyland returned to Venus Bay on his launch with Krystal Chung in tow.

Krystal was a beautiful woman of clearly Chinese appearance. She had an oval goose-egg face, high forehead, long delicate eyebrows, a flat nose with a pale tip, and a mouth like a cherry with a cupid's bow upper lip. At the time of their initial introduction, they were both single, unattached, and feeling unloved. Their relationship had blossomed naturally over a mutual appreciation of the finer aspects of Chinese fish cuisine and fermented bean juice.

Arthur had been incrementally spending more time with Krystal until one eventful night he found himself sharing her bed after they had both overindulged in a few bowls of fermented bean juice. Their friendship had then progressed to the point of becoming a permanent relationship. This was despite their vast differences in age.

Business at Krystal's café had boomed for a few days after the drug war between the Bikers and the Russians on that fateful night not so long ago in Buckleboo Creek. But trade had since fallen into the doldrums. The atmosphere in the town had deteriorated with the pub gone, destroyed

in the fire, and most of the other businesses remaining boarded up. People drifted away from the town centre and took to drinking beer at the bar at the bowls club.

Fermented bean juice had been favoured by a certain class of customer at Krystal's café who objected to the price of alcohol being charged at the pub. These people had often ordered just a bowl of prawn crackers and a jug of bean juice. But even those people were not spending much time on main street now that it had become a wasteland.

If you hadn't acquired a taste for fermented bean juice you would want to throw up on your first mouthful. But once you were hooked on this delicious hot beverage you would immediately order a bowl immediately you hit town.

Krystal and Arthur agreed to re-establish Krystal's café in Venus Bay. They decided to call it the Chinese Bean Juice and Fish Café. There would be an emphasis at the café on the juice part of the business because it was cheap to produce, was very popular and was not subject to any annoying government liquor licences, alcohol taxes or duties.

Arthur had proposed to Krystal on a romantic balmy night as they enjoyed the view of the cove from his launch at the jetty in Buckleboo Creek. She didn't hesitate. She accepted. They soon commenced planning for the wedding. It would be a big affair.

A positive thing about the bean juice café scheme was that they would not be directly competing with Glady's greasy spoon café. They did not want to cause any antagonism with Glady's who they planned to ask to be maid of honour. Glady's was a great friend of Arthur's, but she was by no

stretch of the imagination, a maiden – anyway they knew she would be happy to help out at the wedding. Arthur's assistant, Dennis, agreed to be Arthur's best man.

They decided to re-purpose Arthur's Fishing Tours downstairs office at Venus Bay into the cafe and convert the large upstairs front room of the building into the Fishing Tours office. They would live in Arthur's residential section of the building, which was also upstairs, at the rear.

Krystal had many relatives who wanted to attend the wedding. It was decided that they would charter a jet to fly in ninety-seven of them from Shanghai to Venus Bay via Sydney. After the wedding the guests planned to immediately return to Sydney where they had scheduled a brief stop-over while some of them checked out several real-estate investment opportunities they had been researching from home in China. It was a tight program for the guests. They set about planning a great wedding party. Krystal was the bride – not the chef.

She would be wearing a traditional long red Chinese wedding dress with tiny brightly coloured shoes peeking out below the dress. She started work on the menu and the food arrangements. An excellent chef would be included with the other guests flying in from Shanghai.

Arthur and Krystal had asked the semi-retired pastor from the local Venus Bay Church to officiate. He was a pale, tall, stooped old guy named Stanley Prideaux. He had masses of unruly white hair and was slightly hard of hearing. Stanley was thrilled to be asked to do the honours. He mostly officiated at funerals these days and hadn't done

a wedding in years. This invitation to do a wedding had given him a fresh lease on life.

Krystal and Arthur had invited Sam Gawler and Natasha Timoshenko to the wedding. But they were horrified when they learned that apparently there had been a serious mishap during a storm at sea involving a ship the couple had been travelling on as passengers. They had both been listed as missing.

But here was Natasha in Venus Bay for the Wedding. She had come. She explained to everyone there was no way she was going to miss this wedding. They were all so surprised and happy to see her again after the shocking news they had learned about her disappearance.

Natasha had a story to tell. She explained how she had been rescued at sea and taken to Shanghai by some very kind people on a fishing junk.

She said she had got into a vicious fight over Gawler with a woman called Amanda, who was the ship captain's wife. She said she knew Amanda had been fucking Gawler and she said she was in such a rage that she couldn't stop herself from trying to smash the bitch. She said she lost out in the fight and had been pushed overboard by Amanda.

After she had been struggling to stay afloat against the waves for what seemed like hours she was just about finished from exhaustion, when she had been extremely lucky to float up against a fishing buoy. She had clung grimly to the buoy until she had been found by the Chinese fishing junk. She had felt like she was almost finished when the people on the junk hauled her from the water. "I will always remember those guys," she said. "They were my

salvation. They looked after me, kept me warm and dry and fed me and took me to Shanghai.” She said she had spent a week in hospital in Shanghai recovering from her ordeal clinging to the fishing buoy.

She had asked for help from people in the hospital to find any of Krystal’s Chung’s relatives; “Would it be possible to find members of the Chung family in Shanghai?” she had asked. Natasha knew from what Krystal had told her that they would be somewhere in Shanghai. With a great deal of luck her helpers at the hospital had located Krystal’s number eight aunt in Shanghai.” It was a small miracle,” she said. “There are more than 27 million people living in Shanghai but that didn’t stop my friends at the hospital from trying to find Krystal’s family.”

She said Krystal’s relatives had been found through the ‘*open umbrella*’ missing persons search system. This is where a notice carrying details of a missing person’s family would be attached to an umbrella and carried through the main parks in the city. The notice called for anyone knowing the whereabouts of the missing person or their family to make themselves known to the person holding the umbrella. This system worked like a miracle for Natasha.

Krystal’s family were amazed that Natasha, a stranger from Australia, had found them. They welcomed her into their home and looked after her as she recuperated.

Natasha said her worst experience in Shanghai had been when she was targeted in a scam around a fake traditional Chinese tea ceremony. The scammers had focussed on anyone foreign looking because they usually carried plenty of cash. The scammers became furious when they found

out Natasha carried no cash or credit cards and wasn't able to pay the extortionate amount of cash, they demanded from her for the few tiny glasses tea they consumed in the fake ceremony. They had then unceremoniously tossed her out of the dummy tea shop.

The whole Chung family in Shanghai was excited about Krystal's upcoming marriage in Venus Bay. Natasha was invited to fly with a group of them to Venus Bay for the wedding in their chartered jet. And here she was, in Venus Bay. She was surrounded by a crowd of people, yet she felt very much alone. She muttered to herself "*I don't know most of these people. All those folk from Shanghai have never even heard of Gawler or me. Of the people here I do know, only a few knew us fleetingly. In my deepest heart I want to get this wedding over with and quickly get away from this place. But I will wear my brave face.*"

Natasha asked Arthur Hyland if he could help her with legal advice regarding her situation as a widow from her de-facto marriage to Gawler. He referred her to an online lawyer specialising in family law. The lawyer did some research and advised Natasha that Gawler had died intestate; no will could be located. Natasha was told she would be legally entitled to inherit all of Gawler's assets including his Humvee which was still parked in Arthur's barn. She would also inherit his apartment at Eureka Tower in Melbourne. She could also be entitled to compensation from his employer because he had died while on duty and while employed by Consolidated Rutile. As his only dependent she would be entitled to compensation from the corporation.

She intended that after the wedding she would prepare the Humvee in readiness for the long drive to Melbourne. She would call Sam's buddy, James Wallbridge in London to sort out the compensation issue.

A large red open-sided canvas canopy stood on a grassed area adjacent to the Krystal and Arthur's new café. Inside the tent were rows of wooden benches with chairs along each side.

In accordance with Chinese custom there would be a traditional tea ceremony then just a very brief wedding ceremony late in the afternoon with the main event, the after-party Banquet commencing immediately after the ceremony. The banquet party was expected to continue well into the night.

Krystal said she was planning a huge feast for the banquet consisting of twelve courses as was the Chinese custom.

Krystal told Natasha, "There would be ample supplies of bean juice with fragrant pickled vegetables of the right colour and texture spicy or plain, dough fritters fried golden and crisp and flat bread flaky, and sesame studded."

She said she was planning many more delicacies such as.

Chickens fried with walnuts cooked in the imperial style.

Crispy ducks with roses carved out of carrots with celery leaves attached.

Sweet and sour fish with ample sauce.

Dishes of cabbage juicy and green with large and yellow chestnuts.

She was also preparing to serve oil brazed prawns, stir fried battered eel and spicy squid.

Of course, there would be buckets of steamed rice and fried noodles.

The plan was for the most important toasts of the evening to be made by the bride and groom themselves. After one or several courses had been served and some food eaten, the couple would walk from table to table, offering toasts to thank their guests for attending and bringing generous gifts. The couple would drink wine, beer or bean juice. The bride and groom would toast each table, saying 'gan bei!' (dry cup) and bottoming up their cup each time. Guests would make return toasts to the couple, and the bride and groom must always drink up.

If the drinking became too difficult for the bride or groom; perhaps they felt too drunk to continue or had an allergy to alcohol the Best Man and Maid Of Honour would accompany the couple and, if need be, will step in to drink in their place, saying "Here, let me help you!"

Krystal said. "This type of drinking is a Chinese way of showing good spirit and respect, and it is not uncommon for the bride or groom to be completely drunk by the end of their wedding reception."

Natasha stood before the crowd and kicked off the ceremony. "Welcome to Venus Bay one and all," she said. "I am thrilled to be here with you all and especially my very good friends, the wonderful Chung family. I love you all so much. You saved my life and brought me back to Venus Bay for this fabulous event today. "Now I would like to introduce the Pastor, Stanley Prideaux."

Stanley came forward and stood before the crowd.

He said. "Welcome everyone to our beautiful little

town. It is not at all usual for us to have such a wonderful gathering of guests. “We are gathered here today to unite Krystal and Arthur in the bonds of matrimony. If anyone can show just cause why they may not be lawfully joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace.” There was silence from the crowd

Stanley said to Arthur.

“Do you, Arthur, take Krystal, to be your lawfully wedded wife? From this day forward, to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?

Arthur to Krystal

‘I do.’

Stanley said to Krystal

Do you, Krystal, take Arthur, to be your lawfully wedded husband? From this day forward, to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?

Krystal said to Arthur

‘I do.’

Stanley said to Arthur.

“Please take the ring you have selected for Krystal. As you place it on her finger, repeat after me:”

“Krytal. I give you this ring, as a symbol of my love. I ask you to wear it as a sign to the world that you are my wife. With this ring, I thee wed.”

Arthur repeated the pledge.

Stanley asked Krystal.

Please take the ring you have selected for Arthur. As you place it on his finger, repeat after me:

“Arthur, I give you this ring, as a symbol of my love. I ask you to wear it as a sign to the world that you are my husband. With this ring, I thee wed.

Krystal repeated the pledge.

The happy crowd laughed, cheered, and whistled.

Stanley said. “In so much as the two of you have consented together in matrimony, and have witnessed the same before this company, by authority vested in me I now pronounce you husband and wife.

Arthur, you may kiss your bride!”

Arthur, with his arms around Krystal moved his face closer to her for the kiss.

He was pale, sweating and breathing heavily. He faltered, slumped and dropped his arms. His legs crumpled and he fell heavily to the ground. The crowd gasped. Some guests rushed towards the front to help. But they could not find a pulse. Arthur had died of a sudden heart attack. Four men came from the crowd and together with Krystal guiding them, they carried Arthur to the café. They set Arthur down on a long bench and covered him with a table cloth.

The plan for the wedding had been for the Best Man and Maid Of Honour to offer toasts to the couple, telling funny anecdotes or sentimental speeches.

This plan was now in tatters.

Now someone would need to arrange a funeral for Arthur.

Natasha gathered three of Krystal’s aunts. They were now her firm friends. She told them they needed to work

out what to do next. They decided to settle the crowd by serving them tea and bean juice. The aunts set about organising the drinks while Natasha went to find Krystal, Dennis, and Gladys to plan how to go forward.

They decided to postpone the banquet until the next morning and to hold a funeral for Arthur right away. Denis said his brother-in-law was a carpenter and he had some coffins in his workshop which he always kept ready for emergencies in the town.

Fortunately Stanley Prideaux was still on hand to officiate at the funeral.

But all those other planned wedding events were not going to happen tonight.

It was early in the morning when Krystal and Dennis called all their guests to gather at the tent. They had an announcement to make.

They were getting married. The banquet would go ahead after all. The mountains of food would not go to waste. It all made perfect sense. They had been secret lovers since the time at Buckleboo Creek when Arthur and Dennis had stayed at the jetty on Arthur's launch and they had all spent so much time together.

But Arthur usually went off to bed early in the cabin below deck leaving Dennis and Krystal together, sipping tea and talking.

That was when their romance had flourished.

CHAPTER 38

Natasha swung the Humvee into a space marked Gawler in the basement parking garage of Eureka Tower.

She whispered to the car, *we're out of our class in this place old girl. A Mercedes on one side of us, a flashy model BMW on the other, A Lexus just over there, a bright yellow Lamborghini in that spot next to it and a big black Bentley against the far wall.*

She had been driving for a week, some nights sleeping in the car where she parked in quiet areas at truck stops and some nights at one of the small motels dotted along the highway. Nobody had bothered her. A few truckies gave her a studied look which she ignored. She figured they were hard-working guys, busy with time targets to achieve and no time or intention to dither around.

She took the basement lift to the fifty sixth level. This avoided the need to pass through the ground floor reception area. She thought, *I'm not inclined to chat with Gawler's friends right now.* The apartment was just as they had left it. *Well of course it is,* she mused. *No reason for it not to be.* She checked the refrigerator. *Absolutely empty, damn,* she mused. *No food in the place at all.*

The message light was flashing on the phone. She

pressed play. “Natasha,” it was James in London. “Can you call me as soon as you get in?” Ever obedient, she texted James.

James replied by text, “Can you come to London now, we need to talk. There is an open date airline booking for you with Qantas, business class return to London. We will have a car take you to Tullamarine airport as soon as tomorrow morning if you can make it.”

“*Well why not,*” she said to herself. “*I don’t have anything else happening right now.*” She texted James. “Okay can do – what time can I expect the car?”

She needed to go downstairs to the Seven Eleven store for food. *Can’t avoid the reception area this time,* she mused. Nicole’s jaw dropped when she spotted Natasha alone. She rushed out from behind the desk and embraced Natasha in a bear hug. “So, you’re back already” she said. “where’s Sam?”

Natasha bluntly replied, “he’s dead. He drowned in a shipping disaster. He loved me then he dumped me and now he’s gone. “Nicole said, “how awful, but it’s brutal, the way you are telling me this– as if he didn’t mean so much to you. “Not true. He was my world. He meant everything to me. He did me wrong, he broke my heart, yet I just cannot suddenly get over him.”

Nicole’ mouth turned down, she sobbed a little and then when the shock really set in, she burst into a flood of tears. Natasha could no longer hold back her own tears. They collapsed into each other’s arms. They embraced and sobbed together.

Nicole said, “can we go for a coffee together?”

Natasha said, “I can’t go out with you right now. I

need some food. I'm going to the shop to get a few things then I need to pack. I'm flying to London early tomorrow morning."

Natasha wondered, "*I will never know what Nicole wants to tell me and I don't want to know. Possibly it's something about her and Sam which knowing him as I do now, will not be something I want to hear.*"

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CHAPTER 39

Natasha was ushered into James Wallbridge's office high up in Consolidated Rutile's London head office. He came to greet her as she walked in, smiling at first but he could not hold it together for more than a moment. James started sobbing. "I just can't believe what happened," he said. "I cannot get my head around it." They embraced.

Natasha could not hold back her own tears.

James said, "He was my mate, my best friend going way back. I needed him. I don't know what to do now he is gone. He fixed things, no matter how tough it was, he always got the job done."

"It will be good for us to talk. Will you join me for dinner?"

They were ushered to James' favourite table at a nearby restaurant. It was difficult for them to relax and just talk. Emotions were running high. They exchanged anecdotes about Sam. He made her laugh when he told her about some of Sam's hijinks when they were young.

He said, "Sam told me a lot about you. Did you know he was a great fan of yours? He adored you. He told

me he thought you would be a great acquisition for the corporation.”

She said, “Well he loved me, and I loved him, but then he didn’t love me anymore. He dumped me when he found a floosy. What he did was so brutal.”

James said. “I am so sorry he did that. I had no idea it was coming. I can’t make excuses for him. I can just say he did what he did, that’s just Sam I’m afraid. However, can we both move on? I want to make you an offer.

“We have an important job in our Melbourne office for you. I want you move into the Vice President’s corner office and help us get things under control. I am not saying there are no problems. There are plenty. A faction of conspiracy theorists has become prominent. They are going after anyone who can’t see the conspiracies the say are all around us. They say vaccines are a wicked plot by paedophiles. They say everyone is spying on them and governments are taking away their freedom. The office in Melbourne is becoming a mad house. I know you are someone who could fix it.”

“But I want to study violin James,” she said. “And I need to get back regularly to the gym and back onto the basketball court.”

“You go for it girl,” James said. “We would be comfortable with you doing all of those things,” he said. “You can come and go in the job to suit yourself and still get everything running smoothly again, I know it. But I must warn you right now about the situation you will come up against.

“I Know you can handle yourself, but you will be going

into dangerous territory in Melbourne. Be very careful. The so called ‘freedom movement’ that has inveigled itself into our midst includes some seriously nasty operators. “They are nominally anti-vaxxers but that is just a front for white supremacists, Nazis and QAnon conspiracy fanatics who have infiltrated their membership. They don’t hesitate to spread death threats and bomb threats when it suits their purpose. We are getting them every day.”

“Those people at the Melbourne office who support right-wing conspiracy theories, – their gullibility is alarming. Gullibility means malleability and manipulability. We know that a swathe of the conservative population is available for the next delusion and the one after that. Former President Trump and recent events in the USA showed that a lot of them were willing to act on those beliefs.

Did you know that the word *gullible* comes from the verb *to gull*, which used to mean to cram a person with some information as well as to cheat or dupe? It means to cram someone else full of fictions. Some of these crazies in Melbourne doubtless believe they could gull our corporation.

“Distinctions between believable and unbelievable, true and false, are not relevant for people who have found that taking up outrageous and disprovable ideas are an admission ticket to a conspiratorial identity. Without the yoke of truthfulness around their necks, they can choose beliefs that flatter their worldview or justify their aggression. But we here in this corporation say, ‘you’re entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts.’

“The sort of people who are worrying the corporation

are those who now feel entitled to their own facts. In the marketplace of ideas, they can select or reject ideas, facts, or histories to match their goals, because meaning has become transactional.

“A lot of conspiracy theories emerge from the true believers on the margins of our society when it comes to topics like extra-terrestrials. But some of those at the top of our society like Trump, have preached falsehoods that further the interest of elites, and those at the bottom have embraced them devoutly. Though when we talk about cults and conspiracies, we usually look to more outlandish beliefs, climate denial and gun obsessions both fit this template.”

James said, “well that’s enough of the lecture from me. Let’s get onto talking about the pay offer and the employment conditions the corporation is proposing to offer you.”

Natasha listened with close interest to what James was offering. When he had finished, she grinned and said. “It is a wonderful offer, James. Can you let me think about it overnight? I will get back to you first thing in the morning.” “Great,” James said. “We have booked you a first class room at the Hilton for as long as you need it. Let’s talk again in the morning.”

Next morning Natasha called James and accepted the job offer.

All of her clothes and personal stuff had gone missing during her recent adventures. She was still wearing things she had borrowed from Krystal’s aunts in Shanghai, ill-fitting jeans, some well-worn tee shirts, and Chinese

slip-ons on her feet. With assistance and a credit card from one of James' female staff she spent the next two days site-seeing in London and shopping for several suitcases full of new clothes and shoes. She was starting to feel good about herself again.

Natasha was spotted through the glass security doors at the Consolidated Rutile's office in Collins Street Melbourne by a perky young receptionist. She buzzed Natasha in while she pressed a couple of buttons on her desk console and softly spoke to someone.

Within moments Miriam Cameron strolled through the door to the main office. She was an impeccably presented mature age, grey haired woman who smiled broadly as she introduced herself. "Hello Natasha, I am Miriam, the Personnel Manager here in Melbourne. I'm so glad you have arrived at last. Let me show you around and introduce to some of the key people. "As I guess you have been told, we are up against some awkward personnel issues. It's not a situation we have come across before.

"In my opinion some people are just so frightened of injections that it has overwhelmed their normal thinking process. Anti-vaxxing has become a fanatical obsession. These people are becoming violent, unmanageable. They are running rampant. And it is spreading. Some normally sensible people are getting caught up in the stupidity. It is threatening everything we are trying to do here."

Miriam introduced Natasha to some of the people working in the place as she showed her to her corner office. "Our previous Vice President suddenly quit two weeks ago. After two decades running the show, the pressure of

trying to manage with the antivaxxers rampaging through the place became too much and he walked.”

Natasha said. “Maybe you’ve heard of Sam Gawler, he was the company Hitman working out of London. I worked with him for a while. He taught me a lot. I know Sam would not spend a lot of time trying to reconcile with these insane fanatics. He would say they needed to go, and quickly. I think we should follow Sam’s example and neutralise the problem people in this place before the shooting starts, so to speak.”

Miriam said. “Yes, I did meet Sam once when he passed through town. He certainly knew how to sort out a sticky issue. You seem to have been quite taken with him.” Natasha said, “Well yes, I was quite taken with him to say the least, but can we leave it at that for now?”

Miriam said. “Sam left a manuscript with me when he was here. It was a memoir. He said if anything ever happened to him, I should pass the manuscript on to a publisher he knew called Balboa. The manuscript was titled, They Called Me A Hitman. He said a guy there named Jim was the person to speak with. Natasha said. “Well, I wouldn’t know anything about all of that, but I would be wary of what was true or otherwise in the story because Sam sometimes wasn’t clear in his head about issues relating to what was factual and about personal relationships.

Natasha knew instinctively she needed some allies in the office to assist her in what she decided to call ‘the cleanout’. She checked the place for who was around. It would not be the most obvious loud mouthed strutting peacock trying to catch her attention. Or the thuggish looking bossy guy who

would only end up making the problem worse. She settled on finding out some more about an average looking guy, not big like Gawler, a little older than her, not someone obviously looking to stand out. But who seemed to be smart. As she was being shown around and introduced to people she said to Miriam, “And who is that quiet guy working at his computer over there.”

Miriam said, “That’s Timothy Moloney, He’s a specialist in heavy mining machinery, huge bucket wheel excavators, two-thousand-ton ship-loaders, giant ore-stacking machines, that sort of thing. Just quietly he is known around here as a hot-shot engineer, but you wouldn’t know it from his discreet manner. He does the big contractual deals, and he holds the chequebook, if you get my meaning. “Natasha said, “He sounds like the sort of person who could work well with me. I would like to chat with him in my office.”

Timothy and Natasha clicked instantly. Not in the lustful way she had related with Gawler but in a way that felt comfortable, in a way she knew that could work as a partnership for them. Timothy knew all about the dangerous individuals in the office. He told her he had been quietly keeping an eye on their antics. He had been interested, perhaps subtly alarmed, but not intimidated by them. Natasha and Timothy set about deciding how to handle the staffing situation. He knew where to start. He said to Natasha. “You can’t just sack someone because you don’t like their political beliefs or their religion or their fantasies or their sexual orientation. But you can move them on. If they are a disruption or even a danger, you can

get them out of the way. Send them to some place where no-one takes crazies seriously”

Natasha said, “I know of an ideal place we could move a person like that to. Have you heard of a desolate place called Buckleboo Creek, it’s in Far North Queensland, the corporation operates a gold mine there?”

“Yes, I know it,” he said. “I think a few of our problem people could calm their impulses there for a while, so to speak. The folk up there would just let them rave to their heart’s content without making a difference to anything. And we’ve got several out-of-the-way places like that. There’s the stifling hot Port Hedland in the Pilbara at the top of Western Australia, way up through the Simpson desert where we have a giant iron ore processing operation, and then there’s the freezing cold sites to the South, in Tasmania, where the corporation operates a couple of clapped-out old zinc installations, so, there are ample options.”

Natasha said, “Well now I think the arrangements for the big exodus can begin.”

Miriam walked through the office thinking about what lay ahead. Natasha had brought her up to date on her plan. It was now Miriam’s job to make it happen. *“She arrived here this morning, it’s not yet lunchtime. She has made a plan and now she is getting straight into moving things along. This girl is some dynamo.”* Natasha said to Timothy. “It’s coming up to lunchtime. Would you like to come with me to the gym?”

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