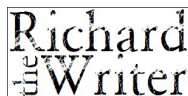


Natalia

Richard Jefferis



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aka Richard The Writer.

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Chapter One

*If I didn't have a dime
And I didn't take the time
To play the jukebox*

I sighed and turned the radio up a little. I didn't know the song but it was sung by someone with a gentle voice and it had a happy beat. God knows I needed a happy beat these days.

*Wo-oh-oh Saturday night
Would have been a sad and lonely night
For me*

I smiled wryly and gazed out over the wet beach reflecting that I knew a lot about sad and lonely nights, Saturdays or otherwise. Another big wave, driven by the storm now some way out to sea and past the cape opposite, rolled in. It looked as though it might reach the car and I readied myself to back away but it stopped some way short.

*And if you weren't standing there
_Ruby lips and golden hair
Beside the jukebox*

I relaxed back into the seat and watched the wave. I had a funny feeling it was laughing contemptuously at me. Probably because I didn't have ruby lips or golden hair. I didn't have a jukebox either, whatever that was.

*Wo-oh-oh I'd have lost my chance
To hold you while you danced
With me*

A bird of some description swooped down and landed on the wet sand. It started pecking in the hope that there was something to eat within a beak length of the surface. It was good to see that something still had hope.

"Good luck to you, mate," I muttered and switched the car into reverse.

I glanced over my shoulder to check there was no one behind then squeezed the power grip and the car rolled quietly backwards, curving away from the waves as I tilted the steering bar a little to the left. The singer burst into a series of short catchy phrases as he sang of walking and talking with the girl with ruby lips and golden hair and some enthusiastic backing singers repeated every word. They managed to get to their first kiss about the time my car was pointing in the right direction to leave. Then it was back to the original melody.

*Wo-oh-oh that song that they sing
Wouldn't mean a single thing
Even though you're standing there
Ruby lips and golden hair
If I didn't have a dime
And I didn't take the time
To play the jukebox*

The final *jukebox* hung in the air for a few moments as I drove off the foreshore and paused where it rejoined the road into town. The sky behind the beach was as black as my dreams and the air felt heavy and oppressive.

“And that's another classic from State Radio Classic Oldies,” said the radio in an awed breathy sounding voice. They always sounded awed and breathy on this station for some reason. Perhaps it was because they knew they were in the presence of classics or simply to make the songs they played sound more impressive. “Gene Pitney, from 1962 with a delightful little number called If I Didn't Have A Dime. Seventy years ago, if you can believe that. Sounds as fresh and poignant now as it must have way back then. Coming up, another timeless classic from Billie Ellish from 2020, for all you Bad Boys out there but first, a bulletin from our Political Commissariat.”

“Oh, god, no,” I muttered and flicked the radio off. I wasn't in the mood for a political bulletin.

There was a sudden flash of lightning off to the West and I instinctively started counting.

“About 4km away,” I muttered when the thunder came. It looked like

the storm either hadn't finished after all or another was following in on its heels.

I squeezed the power grip and the car surged forward then it rocked as another car shot past, swerving slightly and narrowly missing mine. I instantly let go of the grip and the car ground to a halt, its brakes automatically engaging. My heart was suddenly beating faster and my chest felt empty.

“Sorry,” I called, rather pointlessly as the occupants wouldn't be able to hear me, especially as my voice had gone as breathy as the radio DJ's.

There was a reasonable chance whoever was in the other car hadn't even noticed since it was one of those fully automatic, driverless cars that were the bane of my life. Who needs driving lessons when the car drives itself? My business, such as it was, was on a decline as these days it was mainly the older people who refused to trust themselves to an entirely automated machine, and those older people mostly already knew how to drive and a fair number still had their old petrol cars or had adapted to a newer electric one. My career as a driving instructor was fading rapidly. It didn't help that I had just pulled out in front of another vehicle and nearly caused an accident. Fortunately no potential customers had seen the near miss or read the logo on the side of my car as the road was deserted. No one with any sense would be out in this weather. I was, of course, but I didn't have much sense. The big waves thrown up by the storm hadn't really offered any viable solution.

I switched the car back into drive and looked carefully up and down the road. Nothing was coming so I squeezed the grip and moved out onto the road. It looked appreciably darker than it had a moment before so I flicked on the lights just as another jagged flash of lightning rent the clouds a little off to the right.

“Jesus,” I muttered and speeded up.

The peal of thunder came less than three seconds later and the car reverberated in sympathy. A moment later whatever being lived in the sky upended a giant bucket of water over the car and I flicked the

windscreen wipers to maximum. They did their best but it was like driving a submarine as a torrent of rain lashed down, hurled by a sudden howling wind. The sparse trees lining the foreshore bent almost to the ground as if worshipping the spirit in the sky, praying for salvation. Another flash of lightning sliced a ragged tear across the purple black sky, this time a little off to my left and the thunder was almost instantaneous. Frightened now, I brought the car to a halt, pulling over to where I thought the edge of the road might be, and cowered in my seat, wishing that it didn't have such an expanse of windows. The rain pounded on the roof and tried to tear off the wipers. Another gust of wind smashed against the side of the car and I swear the vehicle slid sideways a little. I yelped and clung on to the seat belt with both hands, lifting my feet off the floor of the car as though it was already flooding inside. Not far away one of the supplicating trees gave up the will to live and crashed down, its sound lost in the howls of the wind.

Another flash of lightning, further away to the left and a four second delay before the thunder. The rain began to ease to a heavy downpour and the wind dropped. Cautiously I peered between the wiper blades. The trees were vertical again, admittedly swaying agitatedly from side to side, but no longer praying for mercy. Another flash of lightning, this time over the cape on the other side of the bay. Another delay, this time almost ten seconds, before the thunder. Another easing of the wind and rain. Now it was more like the shower in my bathroom at home with the power setting turned off.

I put my feet back on the floor of the car and unpeeled my hands from the seat belt. There were red marks on my palms where the edges of the belt had cut in. I inspected them then shook my hands to encourage the marks to go away and loosen up my finger muscles.

There was a sudden heavy whine and the dark shadow of a truck pulled up beside me. I looked over as the side window of the truck slid down and a man's head and shoulders appeared. He seemed to be saying something so I let my window down.

"I'm sorry?" I called.

"You alright, love?" he called back.

"I'm fine, thanks," I called, waving a hand as if that in some way proved I was alright. "I just pulled over to ride out the storm."

"Jesus, that was a bugger," he called, grimacing to show how much of a bugger it had been. "Lucky it didn't push you off the road. I felt my back end sliding out but a little jobbie like yours, Jesus. You OK to get into town?" He gestured with his thumb towards the town, barely a kilometre ahead.

"I'm fine," I called back, giving a brave smile. "All good. Rain's nearly stopped."

For some reason I held my hand out to demonstrate that the rain had nearly stopped and it got wet, unsurprisingly.

The truckie grinned and waved and disappeared back into his driving seat. With a hiss of air brakes and a sudden deep whine of his electric turbines he started to accelerate away, hauling a second trailer behind his truck.

I wiped my wet hand on my skirt and closed the window again. The rain had eased a lot so I turned the wipers down to about a third and took off after him. At the roundabout on the edge of town he went right to follow the bypass and I went left to go into town. Seeing me diverge he let out a farewell bellow on his horn and I flashed my headlights in a mute thanks for his offer of aid. For a few brief moments I felt a connection with another human being.

I pulled over just after the sign in the shape of a fish that said "Welcome To Juma Creek, pop. 2977, alt. 1.2m Please Drive Carefully" and parked next to the one that said "Winner Tidiest Coastal Town 2018, 2021, 2022". If only the judges could see the place now. The street was littered with branches and leaves and what looked like a section of someone's roof. Several garbage bins had been blown over and their contents tossed around. The gutters were awash as water spewed out of the drains, washing whatever had collected back into the street and the buildings had a sodden, depressed look about them. The sign itself was dented and going a little rusty around the edges. Several of the shops further along had lights on even though it was only lunchtime. Still, the sky was now a dark grey and the rain was

down to a light shower.

I got out of the car and half ran over to the bakery to get some lunch.

“Hell of a storm,” remarked Raj, leaning on the counter and beaming at me. There was no one else in the shop. “Were you caught?”

“Yes,” I said, running my fingers through my damp hair. “I was out on the foreshore. Some trees are down.”

“I’m surprised the power’s still on,” he said, waving at the overhead lights. “With a customer, were you?”

“No,” I said, glancing at him to see if he was laughing before resuming my scanning of the delicacies laid out on trays behind his glass counter. “No customers today unfortunately. I just went out for a drive and to do some thinking.”

“Ahh, thinking,” he said nodding sagely. “Dangerous thing that. No good ever comes of it. What can I do you for?”

“Ohh, one of those,” I said, pointing to what was labelled Ham Salad Focaccia but looked more like Chicken and Avocado, “and a Kit Kat.”

“Is that all?” he asked, deftly lifting the focaccia into a paper bag with a pair of tongs.

“Yeah,” I said, leaning my hip against the wooden part of the counter where the till was. “I’m not hungry today.”

“You are feeling unwell?” he asked, his beaming face changing with practised speed into a look of concern.

“Just a little tired and listless,” I said. “I’ll be fine after a nap.”

“You are going home now?”

“No, maybe” I said with a tired listless sigh. “Ahh, probably. Got to stop by the office though. Something might have happened.”

“Let us hope it is nothing bad,” he said, poking his till. “87 yawns.”

I waved my card at his machine and he handed me my paper bag and Kit Kat.

“Thanks,” I said, “See you tomorrow.”

“Sleep well,” he said, his face beaming again.

I turned towards the door to leave then a thought occurred to me.

“Hey, Raj, do you know what a jukebox is?”

“A jukebox?” he echoed. His face creased in thought and he stroked his dark bushy beard. “Is it not the box that controls the operating of your car?”

“No,” I said, “that’s the controller box. No worries. Thanks.”

I gave him a little wave as I walked through the door. The rain had stopped and the cloud cover was breaking up. A tired, listless ray of sunshine managed to break through a gap and made some raindrops on some geraniums behind the Tidy Town sign sparkle. I dumped the purchases on the passenger seat then climbed into the driver’s seat. I waited while an elderly looking petrol engined car chugged past then squeezed the power grip and slid out behind it. I coughed and closed the air vents.

“Nasty smelly things,” I muttered irritably. “Surprised the cops let it on the roads.”

The car carefully navigated its way around the roof section then turned off down Kershaw Road without indicating, much to my professional horror, and I carried on for another block. I turned right, indicating carefully even though there was nothing behind me, into Susan Street. Fifty metres or so along I pulled over outside the last building. My, or our I should say, office.

I grabbed the food and got out and wandered towards the front door which was left open as usual. The building was one of those 1990s

pre-fab 'executive' houses that would have looked quite good in the 1990s but which hadn't aged well. It now looked drab and faintly disreputable with its window frames peeling and cracked and some of the coated panels along the walls had warped. Its conversion to 'twin offices with shared facilities', sometime in the late 2000s, hadn't improved it.

Paige and I had the room to the right of the entrance as our office and a dentist had the one to the left as his surgery. There was a kitchen and a bathroom behind the offices as well as another room that we jointly used for storage. The room also had a bed in it for those occasions when the dentist brought a friend back that he didn't want his wife to meet. It wasn't a good arrangement as there was a constant movement of people coming to get their teeth fixed and we could never tell if any of the footsteps were headed for us. This meant there was a better than even chance that a customer might drop in and catch us looking less than busy which is never a good thing. It also meant that there were usually two or three people sitting in the hallway looking sad which didn't improve our image either.

There was only one person waiting in the hallway when I strode in as it was around lunch time. A youngish woman with strained eyes and no makeup who was holding the side of her face. She winced when the warped floorboards shifted as I came in. I gave her a sympathetic smile but she ignored me pointedly. I opened the door to Juma Creek Driving Instructors and Paige jerked guiltily upright at her desk.

"Oh, it's you, Nat," she said, her professionally welcoming face fading to her normal expression of bored worry.

"Yup," I said shutting the door on the woman with toothache. "Where's Griff?"

"He's off looking for another job," she said, slouching back in her ageing but still serviceable chair.

"Good luck to him," I said, dumping the focaccia on her desk.

She unwrapped it and peered suspiciously at it as I went over to my desk and sat down. My chair squeaked as it was older than Paige's

and a little less serviceable.

"Thanks," she said unconvincingly. "How much do I owe you?"

"Sixty eight yawns," I said and she wrote it on the sheet that we used to record what we paid for each other. Every now and then one of us would settle the small amount that netted out.

"So is Griff using his initiative?" I asked, finding the idea unlikely.

I put the Kit Kat on my desk and sat back.

"I sent him," she said. "I don't think we can afford to pay him much longer."

"Yeah," I said, not bothering to make any other remark. I'd been wondering when this point would arrive.

Paige and I were partners in the business and Griffen, or Griff as he was generally known, was our receptionist, mechanic and general dogsbody. At the tender age of almost 17 we were able to pay him a derisory minimum wage and, frankly, he didn't really warrant even that much but we had to employ a male to avoid any problems with the Equal Opportunities Commission. That august body had been set up in 2027 after the change in Government in order to give the appearance of a concession to the rights of women and, to our fascination and sexist dismay, had decreed almost immediately that any business employing only women had to employ a minimum of one third of a man for each woman. For some reason it didn't work the other way so businesses employing only men were under no obligation to employ any women. This led to a rapid increase in the number of small businesses run by women as we were, surprisingly quickly in fact, pushed out of the workforce.

Paige and I had joined forces to set up our driving business and we'd had to employ a whole man as two thirds of a man wasn't viable. As a third instructor wasn't feasible since we were in a smallish country town near the border between NSW and Victoria, we'd elected to get the cheapest unskilled man we could find; a school leaver. Mind you, the massage parlours and brothels around the country had had a

bigger problem, even if the unemployment rate had dropped significantly.

Paige bit into her focaccia and chewed it thoughtfully. I picked up my Kit Kat and tapped it thoughtfully on my desk, wondering if I could be bothered to eat it. We both stiffened when footsteps came from the hallway but relaxed when it became apparent that the footsteps were going away. No doubt the young woman with toothache was about to have her problems resolved. No such luck for us.

“So did you get caught in the storm?” asked Paige after she’d swallowed her mouthful.

“I was out at the foreshore,” I said, not looking at her.

“Right,” she said flatly, not reacting to me not looking at her. “No sign of any shipwrecks?”

“Sadly no,” I said, unwrapping the paper around the Kit Kat. I’d decided it was more effort to take it to the fridge in the kitchen than it was to eat it.

“Bummer,” she said dispiritedly. “So no gold or electrical goods to plunder then.”

She bit off another hunk of focaccia and I used my thumbnail to slit the silver foil and unpeel the chocolate wafers. It was warm and the chocolate coating was soft and sticky and made my fingers gooey.

“So I guess it’s about time,” I said casually, dropping the Kit Kat into my bin.

“We just need a few customers,” she said. “We’ve got enough in the bank to pay the rent and utilities for maybe another eight weeks but that’s all. The three we’ve got are nearly at the end of their courses.”

“Oh, great,” I said, feeling even more depressed than usual. “So the Fourteen Rivers Project is about to get two new labourers. Wonderful, just bloody wonderful.”

"It mightn't be that bad," she said, being an optimist. "We both might find something else before we're sent there."

"Right," I said sarcastically. "We're both overloaded with saleable skills, aren't we. Come on, Paige, neither of us even speaks Chinese!"

"Well, we can't just give up," she said, scowling. "I've a sick husband to support." She jerked upright suddenly and stared at me in concern. "Oh shit. I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me. I'm so sorry, Nat."

I just stared at her, willing the tears prickling behind my eyes to stay put and not trickle down my face. Paige got up and came over to give me a hug.

"I'm sorry, hun," she whispered. "I wasn't thinking."

"It's OK," I said, pushing her away. "It's all ancient history now. I'm fine."

"You sure?" she asked, stepping back and studying me.

"Sure I'm sure," I said. "I'm over it."

I opened the one drawer of my desk that wasn't jammed and took out a box of tissues.

"I just need to blow my nose," I said, seeing Paige's anxious look. "Go and sit down."

"Nat?" she asked worriedly. She stepped forward again.

"I'm fine," I said, taking a tissue and holding it to my nose. "Go and sit down. I'm OK," and to prove it I burst into tears, unable to hold back the pain any longer.

"Oh god," said Paige, rushing to hug me again and knocking the tissue box onto the floor in the process.

She was bending over to hug me and pick up the tissues at the same time when the door creaked.

“Ahh, excuse me,” said a husky male voice. “Is this where I can get some driving lessons?”

Chapter Two

The man must have realised at that moment that he had stumbled into a 'situation'.

"Ah, sorry. Didn't realise ..., umm, I'll come back later, yeah," he said, sounding a little confused, and backed out of the door.

"Umm, sorry!" called Paige, "hold on a moment."

She dropped the tissue box and started for the door then paused.

"Customer," she hissed at me. "Pull yourself together," then almost ran to head him off.

She appeared again a couple of moments later with the man in tow.

"Excuse me," I said in a weepy voice, trying to cover my face with a fistful of sodden tissues. "I'm not feeling so good. Something I ate or ... back in a moment," and dashed off to the toilet in the back.

The shock of a possible customer had managed to stop the tears and I stood in front of the basin splashing cold water on my face for a bit. I got a wad of paper from the roll and soaked it and held it against my eyes. The coldness was very soothing and the heat in my eyes died down quite quickly. Then I saw myself in the mirror and had to wash my face properly as my makeup was all over the place. The face that looked back at me after that was a little pale and my eyes were a smidge bloodshot and puffy underneath but it would have to do. I ran my fingers through my hair and decided that a tousled look could just possibly work under the circumstances then hoicked my skirt around as it had got twisted.

"Right," I said firmly to myself in the mirror. "Professional, efficient, positive!"

My reflection didn't look convinced so I ignored it and marched efficiently back to the office. Paige was sitting at her desk explaining the various package deals we had to the man, whose back was to the door. His head was bent as he studied a document Paige had given

him. I slipped through and quietly closed the door behind me. She glanced up and gave me a silent 'phraww' and nodded at the man. He looked up and she instantly became business-like again.

"So do any of those options appeal to you, Mr Tanner?" she asked smoothly.

I quietly walked back to my desk and sat down, willing the chair not to squeak. It did, more loudly than usual, and the man looked over. He was definitely 'phraww' material. He had a kind yet strong face with a close cropped salt and pepper beard and the kind of tan that comes from leisure not labouring in the Australian sun. He had serious eyes the colour of hazel but there was a hint of humour there as well. I could see why Paige was fawning over him, above and beyond the call of duty so to speak.

"I hope you are feeling better," he said with a smile.

"Oh, yes, much better, thank you, Mr Tanner," I said trying to be bright and cheerful.

I gave him my best smile then flipped open my diary at a random date and started to study it.

"This is Natalia Hadlow, my partner," said Paige briskly.

I looked up to give Mr Tanner a smile of acknowledgement just as he raised an eyebrow and asked "you mean in this business or ...?"

Paige looked startled then hurriedly explained that she was, actually, married and that I was only another driving instructor and nothing more.

"Ahh," said Mr Tanner. He smiled at me again then turned back to Paige. "As I was saying, I have already taken the theory exam so those first two options would be unnecessary. The thing is, I'm newly arrived in Juma Creek and I don't have a car or know anyone who would take me driving. I'm thinking the full one hundred hour option would be best."

“Yes, I appreciate your situation, Mr Tanner,” said Paige, keeping herself under superb self control. “I’m inclined to think that would be the best under the circumstances.”

“Oh, call me Bram,” said Mr Tanner. “If I’m going to be here for that long we don’t need to keep up the formalities.”

“Absolutely, Bram,” said Paige, beaming at him. She pulled her notebook closer and flicked its screen to find the appropriate form. “Incidentally, even though the full hundred hour package is substantially discounted already, we offer a further 5% discount if it is paid for in full in advance.”

“I do have a couple of questions, though,” said Bram and Paige instantly became serious and leaned closer towards him, eager to help in any way she could.

“We are here to help,” she said.

“If I turn out not to be good enough to pass the test at the end of the time,” he asked, “am I able to get extra tuition included or would that be extra?”

“We will help you in any way we can at no extra charge,” said Paige, knowing as well as I did that we’d probably be out of business before he’d finished his required hundred hours of driving experience.

“Great,” he said, “and can Natalia be my instructor?”

“Ahh, I just need to check she has room on her schedule,” said Paige. “Excuse me, Natalia?”

“Yes?” I said, pretending to look up from my screen. I’d actually been surreptitiously watching and wondering if Bram’s haircut had been as expensive as it looked.

“Bram is interested in the full hundred hour option,” said Paige. “Do you have room in your schedule to accommodate him?”

“Ahh,” I said, with a frown. “Hmm. Over what sort of time period? A

year? Six months?"

"How about six months?" said Bram.

"That would be four hours a week," I said, studying my upcoming schedule. I had a grand total of two hours of tuition booked in the next seven days. "Umm, I think I can find some space. Would afternoons suit?"

"Afternoons would be fine," said Bram. "When can we start?"

"How about tomorrow at 2?" I asked. "I've had a cancellation. We can sort out a regular slot after that."

"Perfect," he said.

"Excellent," said Paige. "Would you like to pay up front or by instalments?"

"Oh, up front would be easiest," said Bram, pulling his phone out of his pocket. "How much would that be?"

"Forty thousand yawns," said Paige briskly, "but with the discount ..."

"Yawns?" asked Bram.

"Yawns?" said Paige. "Oh, umm, Australian Yuans. We just call them yawns. It's easier to say."

"Right," said Bram. "I'm from Western Australia. Over there we call them eyes. A Y, eye, you see. Yawns, I like that. 5% you said? So that'll be thirty eight thousand?"

"Yes," said Paige, her hand twitching in anticipation. "As you're from WA I'll need to see your Internal Migration Permit as well as your local Residency Permit."

"No problem," said Bram. "I'll just send them, what's your number?"

She gave him the number and a few moments later her notebook

pinged.

“Excellent,” she said, looking at her screen. “Oh, Wattle Street, that's in your Village isn't it, Natalia?”

“Wattle Street?” I said. “Yes, I think so. It's the road behind mine anyway.”

“Awesome,” said Bram, turning to smile at me. “So do I walk round to your place or come here?”

“I'll pick you up at your house,” I said.

“Great,” he said. “I'm looking forward to it.”

“Umm, if we could just do the transfer,” said Paige. “I've done the invoice.”

“Of course,” said Bran and pointed the screen of his phone at Paige's screen. It pinged and he touched his screen to confirm authorisation of the payment.

“Excellent,” said Paige, checking the transfer had been made. “So Natalia will meet you at your address tomorrow at 2pm.”

“Awesome,” said Bram.

“Great,” I said. “You're already in my calendar.”

“Right then, I'll see you tomorrow,” he said, turning to smile at me again.

“Yes,” I said. “2pm.”

We all sat there for a few moments not quite knowing what to do then Bram got up and made his farewells. We listened to his footsteps go down the hallway and out into the street and continued to sit in silence for perhaps another half minute in case he came back. Then we started screaming.

“Thirty eight thousand!” sang Paige shoving her chair back and drumming her feet on the floor. “Thirty eight thousand! Up front! Oh, you’re a bloody bitch though!”

“What did I do?” I asked, pausing in my own little dance to look at her in concern.

“I wanted to do him myself,” she said, scowling at me. “God almighty, wasn’t he ... phraww, I could spend a hundred hours with him, no trouble.”

“Pah,” I said. “He obviously didn’t like you. Probably thought you were too pushy.”

“Oh, to hell with it,” she said brightening up again at the thought of all that money. She checked the transaction again and beamed at me. “That was a nice touch, a cancellation. That sounded really good.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It was almost true. If I’d had a booking I’d of cancelled it.”

Paige laughed and looked at the transaction again, just to be sure.

“I wonder if he’s married,” she said. “Did you see his reaction when he thought we were an item?”

“Back off,” I said, seeing instantly where she was heading with this. “He’s a handsome guy, all right, but I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“Who said anything about a relationship?” she asked, trying to look innocent. “Time you had a bit of fun, though.”

“Not interested,” I said firmly. “Drop it, OK.”

“OK,” she said, “bit of a bloody waste, though. Hey, maybe you could go sick and palm him off onto me.”

“You’re married,” I said, “and he knows it.”

“Yeah,” she said sadly. “Oh well. Where's that bloody Griff? I need him to give the car a clean.”

* * *

My euphoria had faded by the time I got back to my little duplex. It wasn't helped by my discovery that the storm had blown out a window in my bedroom and my bedding was wet. Fortunately only the edge of the mattress itself was damp so I stripped the bed and left the mattress to dry. I dumped the wet bedding in the laundry and shut the door on it.

Back in the kitchen I scanned the contents of the fridge and nothing appealed so I got out a couple of eggs and some cheese to make an omelette. The prospect of an omelette wasn't exciting so I left the eggs and cheese on the counter and got a bottle of wine out of the cupboard. It had a pretty label and a screw cap which was all I needed in the way of quality. I rinsed a glass and took it and the bottle out onto the verandah then went back for a cloth to dry my one and only cheap plastic garden chair.

I was half way through my first glass of wine and morosely watching the sunset over the duplexes on the other side of the street when I heard the doorbell ring. I didn't bother to get up to answer it as I wasn't expecting anyone and wasn't in the mood for visitors anyway. The doorbell rang again and I ignored it again. I finished the glass of wine and was pouring another when someone called “Oh, there you are, Natalia!” making me jump and spill a few drops.

I put the bottle and glass down and got up to peer over the rail to see who it was.

“Oh, hi, John,” I said, unenthusiastically. “You looking for me?”

“Wanted to have a chat,” he said, looking up. “Can I come in?”

“I suppose so,” I said. “Come on round.”

I left the wine where it was as I fully intended to come back to it as soon as I could and went to open the door for John. He was the

Chairman of the local Village Residents' Committee and, as such, I couldn't really ignore him.

"Come on in," I said, opening the door. "Is this going to be a long or short chat?"

"Probably not that short," he said, hefting a briefcase.

"OK," I said. "Do you want a coffee?"

"No thanks," he said coming in. "My dinner will be waiting when I get home."

"Take a seat," I said, scooping a pile of unfolded washing off the only armchair. I dumped the pile on the couch and sat next to it so he couldn't sit on the couch with me.

"Thanks," he said, sitting in the armchair. He put his briefcase on the floor beside him.

"Well now," he said, looking as serious as his chubby round face could look, "how've you been?"

"Fine," I said.

"Not been ill, have you?" he asked.

"No, not since that bout of flu last winter," I said, wondering where this was going.

"Only you weren't at the Village Residents' Meeting last Saturday," he said.

"Ahh," I said, suddenly realising why he was here. "I thought it was next Saturday."

"It was in your calendar, Natalia," he said. "I know. I put it there."

"I must have got my dates mixed up," I said apologetically.

“Mmm,” he said. “You seem to have a habit of doing that. Do you realise you’ve only been to three monthly meetings in the last six months?”

“I’m sure it’s more than that,” I said frowning.

“No, we keep thorough records,” he said. “Natalia, you know I’ve always liked you,” and he leaned forward and tried to put his hand on my knee but it was a centimetre or so too far and I moved my knee further away to be safe. No doubt he intended it to be reassuring but I’d always found him a bit creepy.

“The thing is,” he continued, pulling back slightly, “your absences have been noted and Wu Wei Qi was going to come and see you but I felt it would be better if I did first.”

John was the elected Chairman of the Committee but Wu Wei Qi was the Secretary to the Committee and a Party appointee, appointed by the New South Wales State Committee. In practice he out-ranked John. A Village is, incidentally, a collection of about a hundred residences. Juma Creek had somewhere around a hundred Villages within the scope of its Municipality Committee and was itself subordinate to the NSW South Eastern Border Committee.

“I thought it would be better, at this stage, if we had a friendly chat,” said John. “You know Wei can be a little heavy handed sometimes.”

“Well, umm, thank you, John,” I said. “I’ll make a special effort to be there for the next meeting. Was that all?” I half got up.

John laughed in an affected way and slowly shook his head. “If only it was as simple as that,” he said. “As you know, Village Residents are all required to attend a minimum of nine monthly meetings in any twelve month period.”

“Ah,” I said, slumping back down again. “I didn’t know that.” I was starting to detect the faint sour odour of his sweat and I prayed he wasn’t going to be here long enough to make the whole room smell.

“You should do,” he said. “It’s in the Community Rules For Village

Residents, article 2 clause 19, if I remember correctly. You were given a copy but I can give you another if you've misplaced it.”

“Oh, it's around somewhere,” I said. “I'll hunt it up and re-read it.”

“Excellent,” he said. “And when you do, pay special attention to clauses 21 through 24 because they detail the procedure if clause 19 is not followed.”

“Right,” I said slowly, starting to get lost among these clauses.

I must have looked blanker than usual as John decided to enlighten me. Apparently serial offenders who missed a fourth meeting would be hauled up in front of Wei, John and one other committee member and be required to explain, in detail, why they were missing meetings. If the explanation wasn't deemed sufficient, and 'can't be bothered' would almost certainly not be acceptable, the defaulter would be required to undergo a re-education program on the merits and benefits of participation in the Village Community. Failure to be sufficiently re-educated, covered by clauses 26 and 27, would result in sanctions, possible fines and possible other action as determined by the Secretary to the Municipality Committee.

“I'll definitely be at the next meeting,” I said. “You can count on it. Perhaps you could text me the day before?”

“I'm happy to help you in any way I can,” he said. “I could even come round and collect you?”

“Oh, I wouldn't put you to the trouble,” I said, knowing that he'd then want to bring me back afterwards and stay for a chat, or more.

“It's no trouble,” he said with a slight leer. “Only trying to be of help. Now, as to the second matter ...”

“There's more?” I yelped. I didn't mean to yelp but I was taken by surprise and possibly over-reacted.

“Sadly, yes,” he said, putting his briefcase on his ample lap. “It seems your name was brought up at the last Juma Creek Municipality

Committee Meeting.”

“OK,” I said slowly, wondering what I’d done. “I’m guessing not in a good way?”

“You don’t participate in social media, do you?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I really can’t see the point. It’s all monitored and censored and what does get posted is just mindless crap.”

“I’m sorry?” said John, looking as officious as his fat face would let him. “Did you just call public support of the Party ‘mindless crap?’”

“Ah, no,” I said hurriedly. “I meant all the other stuff, you know, what people had for breakfast and so on. No, no, obviously anything supporting the Party gets my full and whole-hearted support.”

“Sadly that’s not the case,” said John. “According to the supplied analysis you haven’t posted anything on any form of social media for several years and you’ve never posted anything supportive of Party Policy.”

“Oh,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “Isn’t that a good thing though? Doesn’t it show that I’m simply one of the silent supportive majority?”

“People who don’t participate in social media are in a minority,” said John sternly. “A small minority. It is the belief of the Party that anyone who does not participate in social media is not wholly integrated in the wider community.”

“Right,” I said, pursing my lips. “Well, I’d better get cracking on doing some posting, then, hadn’t I. As you know I am an avid supporter of both the Party and the wider community. I just need to be more proactive.”

“I knew you’d understand,” said John happily. “As I said to Wei, Natalia is a true supporter. She just needs her enthusiasm to be educated and nurtured in the right direction. I told him straight. Natalia spends too much time alone and doesn’t always get the

guidance that she needs.”

“You told Wei that?” I said, aghast.

“I’m on your side, Natalia,” he said, leaning forward again. His sweat was now making damp patches under his armpits. “In fact, I told Wei that I would be only too happy to be your personal mentor.”

“That’s very kind of you,” I said, horrified at the implications, “but ...”

“You do spend too much time alone, Natalia,” he said. “It’s not healthy. How can you be a vital part of the community if you sit here in your duplex all alone? You really need some company. Someone older, someone who understand both the needs of the community and the needs of a single woman. Someone who cares. Someone who can bring you out of your loneliness.”

“I’m not alone,” I said desperately. “I have friends.”

“Not according to our records,” he said, tapping his briefcase.

“Your records are out of date,” I said in a blind panic. “In fact I made a new friend today. A very nice man who’s just moved here. In fact he’s in this Village.”

“Really?” said John, blinking rapidly. “I haven’t received any notification of a new Resident. Who is this man?”

“His name’s Bram Tanner,” I said. “He lives in Wattle Street. In fact, I’m supposed to be going round to see him this evening. I’m late already, actually.”

“Hmm,” said John, his round face showing every possible nuance of disappointment. “Oh, well, I’d better be going.”

“So soon?” I asked, jumping up and almost running to open the door.

“In a moment,” he said, staying resolutely in the armchair.

“Oh,” I said, walking slowly back. “There’s more?”

He opened his briefcase and rummaged around before pulling out a sheet of paper.

“Here's a list of approved social media platforms,” he said, looking at the sheet. “WeChat is the most popular but you might well appreciate Douyin and Meitu and perhaps some of the others. At the bottom of the page you'll find the details of your approved account logins and passwords. It would be helpful for your community education if you posted something to at least two of the platforms, perhaps three times a week. My IDs are on the reverse of the page if you would like to friend me.”

“Right,” I said, slowly taking the sheet of paper. “Three times a week, hey?”

“By the way,” he said, closing his briefcase and getting to his feet. “There's a Special Meeting of the Village Residents next Wednesday. 6:30 at Wei's house. You need to be there.”

“Will anyone else be there?” I asked suspiciously.

“Of course,” he said. “All Residents are required to attend Special Meetings. In fact, I'm relying on you to bring your new friend if I don't receive notification of him in time.”

Chapter Three

Bram was waiting outside his house when I arrived which surprised me a little. Adults are usually a lot less willing to display enthusiasm than teenagers and teenagers don't bother to learn to drive. Why should they? They've grown up in a world of technology and AI and look at cars in much the same way they do microwave ovens. I daresay the occasional teenager wants to learn the art of propelling a semi-automated machine along a road in much the same way a gourmet handfoul will want to go beyond the simplicity of a microwave oven and explore the culinary arts but I've yet to meet one. Certainly the idea of driving as freedom is no longer even a concept. Your car can be as easily tracked by your parents, friends, enemies or the state as your phone. Regardless, Bram waved when he saw the car and I pulled up alongside him.

"Hop in," I said, winding down the passenger window. "We've some formalities to go through before we can start."

"Sure," he said, smiling.

I pressed the button to slide the door open and he climbed in. It was a warm day so I left the door open to catch a little of the sea breeze.

"I just need to set you up as an authorised driver," I said. "Could you hold this for a moment?"

I detached the steering bar and handed it to him, showing him where to hold it.

"Great," I said. "Just stay like that for a moment."

A little yellow dot in the centre of the car's display screen began to flash.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"It means your fingerprints aren't in the list of authorised drivers," I said. "I've got about 45 seconds to start the authorisation process before the car seals itself and calls the police."

“Ohh,” he said, looking a trifle worried. “Hadn't you better get on with it?”

“I'm on to it,” I said, taking the steering bar back.

The car recognised me and flashed some options on the display screen. I chose the one to add a new driver.

“When the screen flashes, say your name the way it appears on your driver's permit,” I said.

“OK,” he said, watching the screen.

I touched the 'Next' option and the screen started to flash.

“Abraham Charles Tanner,” he said clearly.

Nothing happened and he looked enquiringly at me.

“It's a little slow today,” I said. “Often is for a day or two after a big storm. Ah, here we go. Could you look directly ahead?”

“Sure,” he said and looked directly ahead.

“Thanks,” I said, touching the screen. “Right, that's your fingerprints, voice and retina scan done, just waiting for ... there. You've been linked to this car in the central social database and approval has been given. Good.”

His phone warbled but he ignored it.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “I need Party approval to drive this car?”

“It's more a confirmation you are not an unapproved person,” I said. “Someone with an undesirable record of anti-social behaviour.”

“Wow,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “I hadn't realised it had gone this far.”

"These are the times we live in," I said neutrally.

"You don't agree with this, then?" he asked, shooting me an unfathomable look.

"I neither agree nor disagree," I said. "It's just something we are required to do before you can operate this vehicle."

"Hmm," he said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. "So what would constitute undesirable anti-social behaviour?"

"Don't you know about social credits?" I asked, puzzled.

"I'm from WA," he said. "I've heard rumours but we don't have them there. Or, at least, not yet."

"Oh, right," I said. "Yeah, they started here in NSW three, four years ago although they started the roll out in Canberra before that. There's no real news anymore so I've lost track of what's happening elsewhere in Australia. Anyway, the idea is pretty simple. Everyone gets a thousand social credits to begin with and every time you do something that is good for the community you get some credits added and if you do something bad you get some taken away. If you go below 600 you aren't allowed to drive."

"Oh" he said, frowning. He looked at his phone then at me. "Apparently I'm in this car."

I laughed. "Yeah, you'll get that message every time you put your hands on the steering bar. It's just in case someone has managed to impersonate your biometrics. You'll soon learn to ignore them."

"OK," he said. "So I don't need to reply to the message?"

"Nah," I said. "Just delete it, unless it's not you here."

"So have I got some social credits then?" he asked as he deleted the message.

"You must have," I said. "I'd guess you were given your thousand

starter credits when your migration permit was issued.”

“Would have been nice if I'd been told,” he grumbled. “What if I'd done something and lost credits without knowing?”

“There are still flaws in the system,” I said. “One of which is that if you had been deemed undesirable the car would have sealed automatically with me inside as well which puts me at risk. Not good if you have a history of anger related violence.”

“So why didn't you get out first?” he asked.

“You're not the type,” I said. “I didn't need an AI system to tell me that.”

He laughed. “Well, thanks, I guess. What happens if your credits go down to nothing?”

“You go to prison,” I said.

“But you can lose credits for anything undesirable?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“That's right,” I said. “Apparently one of the underlying objectives was to do away with the vast bulk of legislation. There are no laws anymore for things like speeding or murder, just a scale of de-credits. Something like murder will cost you a huge number of credits which will take you a long time to redeem whereas something like littering would only be two or three credits.”

“Wow,” he said again. “So if I persistently throw rubbish around I'll go to prison?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You'd have to litter a lot but yeah. That's another underlying objective. Modifying behaviour. You might throw some litter on the ground but sooner or later you'll realise that there is a consequence, to you personally, not just to the environment, and change your behaviour of your own volition. If you really insist on littering and continue then you'll only have yourself to blame when you go to prison. Loitering's another example. The system knows that

this is your first time in this car so you are probably familiarising yourself with it but if we stay too long it will assume we are preparing to commit a crime and start taking credits off us.”

“What if we were a couple having an argument?” he asked.

“An argument is socially undesirable behaviour,” I said, “so we’d lose credits.”

“Ohh, I’d better watch my tongue then,” he said with a grin then turned serious again. “What if the car’s broken down or we’re waiting to meet someone?”

“If we get challenged for the delay we can put in a reason code,” I said. “It’ll then be reviewed and credits taken away or given accordingly. It doesn’t really apply to us though. The system knows that I’m a driving instructor, the car is an approved learning car and that you are a learner driver. It’ll assume I’m explaining something to you.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “So how do I gain credits?” he asked.

“Do something that benefits other people or the environment,” I said.

“What about the economy?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “The assumption is that anything that benefits the economy will generate money for you.”

“What if it benefits someone at the same time?” he asked. “Like you giving me driving lessons?”

“You’re paying for these lessons,” I said, “so by default I’m not doing this because of my social conscience. I’m doing it for material gain.”

“Right,” he said. “That kind of makes sense. So how does the system know if I’m littering or something?”

“We ought to get going,” I said. “If we stay here much longer the system will start to get suspicious.”

“Oh, OK,” he said. “Should we change places?”

“No,” I said. “You’re a beginner so I’ll drive us somewhere quiet and teach you the basic operations of the machine. Once you are reasonably confident with driving the car around we’ll then go on the roads with other traffic and people.”

“OK,” he said and I replaced the steering bar and headed off to a large car park I knew of a little way out of town. Although it was a nature reserve few people visited so it was usually deserted and ideal for a beginner.

“To answer your question about how the system knows,” I said, driving up the road, “mostly it’s through people reporting you. You throw some rubbish on the ground, someone sees you, takes your photo on their phone and sends it in. Sometimes another system reports you, like this car or a bank system if you try to spend more than you have.”

“OK,” he said and stared out of the window for a while.

I let him stare since it was quite a lot to come to terms with. I’d spent several weeks feeling very anxious when the system was introduced and kept looking over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching me or pointing a phone in my direction. I got used to it after a while, especially when nothing much seemed to happen. What took me a while to realise was that most people didn’t like to report other people because it was so easy to make false accusations in return. If I, for example, reported someone for littering they could make fifty counter reports against me with no real evidence. All you needed was to be photographed beside some rubbish since no one can actually get the timing so perfect that you are photographed in the act of dropping the rubbish. It took me a little longer to realise that this in turn meant most people spent most of their time tip-toeing around on eggshells for fear of being accused of something. The system actually worked, after a fashion, because most people were too scared to do anything they weren’t supposed to do. And those who weren’t too scared and did wrong things went to prison soon enough.

“So how do I find out how many of these credits I have?” he asked

after a while.

“You can do it through your phone,” I told him. “I’ll show you if you like, after the lesson.”

“Thanks,” he said. “So are you married?”

“That’s probably an inappropriate question to ask your instructor,” I said, pausing at an intersection before moving on to the coast road. It wasn’t the first time a student had asked me. “Let’s try and keep this professional, shall we?”

“Oh,” he said then grinned. “So you’re not, then.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked, since no one had made that deduction before.

“You’d have said ‘yes’ if you were,” he said, still grinning. “That would shut down an inappropriate line of enquiry a lot faster than simply saying it’s inappropriate and unprofessional.”

“Quite possibly you’re right,” I said, turning off the coast road onto the dirt track that led to the reserve car park, “about the appropriateness, I mean, not the being married. Now, I’m going to pull up over there and we’ll change places and I’ll take you through the functions and operation of the controls.”

* * *

“So correct me if I’m wrong,” said Bram as I pulled up outside his house, “but the lesson officially finished two minutes ago?”

“Actually, no,” I said. “Officially it finishes when I return you to the starting point, which is here. The fact that we ran a little over the time doesn’t matter.”

“OK,” said Bram, “but we’re here, now, so the lesson is officially over?”

“Yes,” I said.

“So we are not, as of this moment and until the start of the next lesson, in a student-teacher relationship?”

“You being very official all of a sudden,” I said, opening his door. I had a fair idea why and wasn't sure what to do about it.

“I just want to get the appropriateness of the situation clear in my mind,” he said.

“We are not, at this moment, in a student-teacher relationship,” I said.

“So can I, Bram, a non-student, ask you, Natalia, a non-teacher, to join me for a coffee in that cafe down there, with the undertaking that the duration of said visit with not continue past the start of the next lesson?”

I had to laugh. I also had to explain why I was going to drag him to the Village Residents' Meeting next Wednesday and this seemed a good opportunity.

“OK,” I said.

“You also promised to show me how to find out how many credits I have,” he pointed out, “so you are more or less obliged to join me.”

“You can drop the legalese,” I said. “I've already said OK.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said and laughed. “I wasn't expecting that.”

“But I'll pay for my own,” I said. “Shall we drive or walk?”

“Drive,” he said. “The cafe is on your way back to the office.”

“I'm not going back to the office,” I said. “I'm going home.”

I could have bitten my tongue off and mentally kicked myself. I was supposed to have a full schedule so why would I be going home? To my surprise he simply said, “Oh, yes, you live in the next street, don't you,” rather than “I thought you had a full schedule, you lazy bitch.”

“Yes,” I said then realised that if I had had a full schedule I wouldn't have agreed to have coffee with him. Clearly he hadn't fallen for that line of bullshit about a cancellation. Oh well. “I live that way, down a little bit,” and pointed across the road.

“Great,” he said. “So, the coffee ...”

“On our way,” I said and squeezed the power grip.

The cafe was almost deserted as it was time for the local mums to pick up their kids from school and Bram chose a table in the back, a long way from the two other customers.

“A cappuccino, please, Katie,” I said when she came over. I knew her quite well as I dropped in most mornings for a takeaway coffee on my way to the office.

“Same for me,” said Bram

Katie studied him for a few moments then gave me a knowing wink before wandering off behind her coffee machine. I sighed, knowing I was going to have to do a lot of explaining the following morning.

“By the way,” I said, “I was in a tricky situation last night and I had to bring you into it. The upshot is that you're going to have to go to the Village Residents' Meeting next Wednesday.”

“With you?” he asked.

“Well, yes,” I said, “since we're both residents.”

“So you're basically asking me out on a date?” he asked, grinning that infernal grin of his.

“God no,” I said quickly. “I was trapped in a situation and couldn't get out of it.”

“Oh,” he said, dropping his grin. “What sort of situation?”

“John, he's the Chairman of the Committee, came round to see me

and was trying to persuade me to work closely with him on improving my social status,” I said, prodding the pot of sugar sachets.

“And I’m guessing you don’t want to get that close with him?” asked Bram.

“God no,” I said fervently, “he’s really creepy.”

“And I came into this how?” he asked. “Thanks,” he added as Katie brought him his coffee.

“Thanks, hon,” I echoed. “I, um, how can I put this, umm, I kind of needed a man to be seeing so that he’d leave me alone. It’s kind of embarrassing really.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bram. “I think it’s quite flattering. You needed a man and thought immediately of me. That’s rather sweet.”

“Flattering for you,” I said, a trifle tartly, “but embarrassing for me. It’s almost like I had to invent a friend.”

“Couldn’t you have made use of one of your many other men friends?” he asked.

“I don’t have any men friends,” I said. “I live a very quiet life and that’s the problem. The Party thinks that’s very suspicious and John is taking advantage of that to foist himself on me. Anyway, even if I did know another man they’d know I wasn’t involved with him since they track my social media.”

“Yeah, they track everyone’s social media,” said Bram. “Still, I’m happy to be your imaginary friend. I don’t see why I have to go to this Residents’ Meeting though.”

“That’s the thing,” I said. “I was so desperate to get away from him that I brought you up without thinking and he wanted to know who you were since he knew I had no friends. I had to tell him who you were and where you lived.”

“You what?” exclaimed Bram.

"That's why you have to go to the Meeting," I said. "You're in the same Village and John said I was to bring you along since he hadn't yet had the notification of your move so he couldn't officially tell you himself. But he knows now and since it's a Special Meeting, attendance is compulsory. We'll both lose social credits if you don't go."

"Let me get this straight," said Bram, "you gave John, the Chairman of the Village Residents' Committee my name and address?"

"Yes," I said. "OK, I probably shouldn't have but he's going to find out sooner or later."

"Hmm," said Bram and became thoughtful.

I spooned the froth off the top of the coffee and savoured the powdered chocolate until it was all gone, wondering why it seemed to be a big issue for him.

"Is it an issue?" I asked after a while. "I can always tell him I got your address wrong."

"No, he'll still check up on me," said Bram, "and if he can't find me he'll think he's free to approach you again. This rather complicates things."

"I don't understand," I said, stirring the last of the froth into the coffee. "How does it complicate things?"

He sighed. "OK, I'm going to have to tell you something that I wasn't going to tell you for a while. But first, I need you to answer a couple of questions, honestly."

I stopped stirring and stared at him. This wasn't going at all the way I had expected and a shiver of fear ran up and down my spine. Then I gave a little laugh. "What is all this? You trying to make out we're teenagers again? Sitting in a cafe playing Truth or Dare?"

"I'm serious," he said, looking very serious. "Will you answer two questions absolutely honestly?"

I narrowed my eyes. “No,” I said decisively. “I’m under no obligation to you, especially as you seem to expect me to be completely open and honest with you but you won’t reciprocate. Explain why me telling John about you is such an issue and I’ll consider, consider mind you, answering your questions but only after I know what they are.”

I gave up on the coffee and sat back to watch his reaction. It suddenly struck me that the Bram behind his handsome, genial exterior might not get shivers of fear in his spine. There was something about him, although I couldn’t put my finger on it. My own shivers got noticeably stronger.

Bram looked levelly at me for a few moments then around the cafe. Katie was doing something behind her counter and the other two customers were watching something on one of their phones. He carefully moved his untouched coffee out of the way and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“OK,” he said. “I’m going to have to trust you.” He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “My name isn’t Bram Tanner and I haven’t just moved to Juma Creek. The house you picked me up at is unoccupied. I don’t exist and the migration and residency permits are forgeries.”

“Who are you then?” I asked, “and what is all this about?”

“Your turn,” he said. “My two questions.”

“I’m not promising to answer them,” I said. “I want to know what they are first.”

He sighed and half turned away in his seat to look out of the window, the fingers of one hand drumming on the table.

“OK,” he said suddenly, turning back to me. “Question one. Why do you have no friends or lovers?”

“And question two?” I asked, taken aback by the directness of his question.

“What are your feelings towards our overlords?” he asked. “The

Chinese?”

“Wow,” I said. “Just ... wow.”

He twisted back to face me again and stared into my eyes. This probably sounds corny but I could see the truth of his sincerity in them so I decided, 'what the hell'.

“The second one's easy,” I said, glancing around in case someone had moved within hearing distance as this admission could probably cost me all the social credits I had. “I hate the bastards.”

“And the first?” he asked, not reacting.

“That's a little more difficult,” I said, “and I'll probably cry in the telling.”

He got up, walked over to Katie's counter and picked up a couple of paper napkins. He brought them back and sat down again.

“There you go,” he said, putting the napkins in front of me.

“Oh shit,” I said, picking up a napkin as I could feel the pricking behind my eyes already. I dabbed it against my eyes then spread it over them so I couldn't see his face. “I did have someone, years ago. We lived together. His name was Liam and ...” The napkin was starting to get very damp.

“And?” asked Bram quietly.

“They arrested him,” I whispered. “After the invasion, they arrested him.”

I reached blindly for the other napkin and felt Bram's fingers push it towards mine. I gripped them and squeezed hard, my throat constricting.

“And?” he asked, very very softly, not moving his hand.

“They executed ... they executed him ... with a bullet to the, to the

back of his, his, his head and ... and they ... they showed it live on TV and I didn't know, I had no idea, until I saw it on the news and, oh god, I saw them ... with a gun ... in front of Parliament House on the frigging TV.”

Chapter Four

I don't know why I cried so much as it had happened such a long time before. I thought that I had come to terms with it and my bout of tears with Paige the day before hadn't dissuaded me from that for some reason. Perhaps it was simply that I'd told no one else, other than Paige and my mum, so the mere act of my talking about it brought it all back to the surface; relived in glorious 8K technicolor with enhanced audio. Not that a single *crack* from a pistol against a quiet background needs a lot of enhancing.

And Bram showed his true mettle. Not only did he manage to placate an irate Katie in the cafe and not lose any social credits, he drove me home, dumped me on my couch and fed me hot sweet tea and cheese toasties until I'd calmed down again. Impressively he trimmed off the bits of mould growing on the bread before toasting it. Even more impressively he folded my still unfolded laundry while sitting in the armchair watching me and left it in a neat pile. Lesser men would have tried to comfort me and got embarrassed. Sometimes, as all women know and few men can comprehend, sometimes you just have to let it all out unhindered.

"You said his name was Liam?" asked Bram when he sensed I was able and wanting to talk again.

"Yeah," I said. Having kept it bottled up for years it was good to talk, even though it was raw and painful. "Liam Kelly. He was a journalist. Freelance, although he wrote a lot for The Australian, Time and a few specialist political journals. We lived in Canberra, of course."

"Were you a journalist as well?" he asked.

I noticed several pairs of my undies were neatly folded on the top of the laundry and vigorously squashed any embarrassment of my own. I'd more or less bared my soul to a more or less stranger so what did it matter if he'd handled my cheap cotton undies?

"God no, I worked in retail," I said, dabbing up some toast crumbs with a damp fingertip and resolutely refusing to look at the laundry again. "Just a lowly shop assistant in a fashion shop. The pay wasn't

great but I was having a fabulous time playing with lovely clothes and accessories and living with this wonderful man who was this glamorous big time journalist, it was all just so cool.”

“Were you interested in politics yourself?” asked Bram.

“As if,” I said. “I was interested in clothes and being in love and partying. I was only 24. God, that was a dreadful year, horrible. When I turned 24 we were making plans to buy a house and get married and by the time I was 25 everything had been blown apart and turned upside-down. One day Liam was writing a story on how some pollies were involved in branch-stacking and the next day Jacko Jamieson, the Prime Minister, is announcing that Australia is surrendering to the Chinese after an invasion that no one seemed to know anything about. Then a few months later Liam was arrested and three days before my birthday he was murdered.”

“Surely as a journalist Liam must have heard about the invasion?” said Bram.

“It was a beautiful spot,” I said, my mind elsewhere. “Have you been to Canberra? To Parliament House?”

“I’ve been to Canberra,” he said, “but not Parliament House.”

“There’s a pond out the front,” I said, lost in my memories. “It’s a nice pond, called the Reflection Pond. I don’t know if it’s for people to sit by and reflect or if it’s because of the reflection of the sky but it’s a nice place. I’d been there several times and sat on the grassy bit that’s inside the pond. Sometimes Liam would be inside Parliament House, talking to some polly or other or listening to a speech and I’d meet him there after work.”

I picked up the other half of the cheese toastie and looked at it without seeing it.

“That’s where they executed him, you see. Someone read out his sentence and two soldiers marched him out across the walkway onto that grassy patch and made him kneel. Then someone else, an officer, I think, pulled out a pistol and put it to the back of his head then he

fell forward and his head went into the water. At least it was quick. Not like he was locked away for years in some prison somewhere. It was quick, wasn't it?"

"It was very quick," said Bram softly. "He wouldn't have felt a thing."

"I'm pleased about that," I said, lifting the toastie to my mouth then putting it down again untouched. "Yes, I'm so pleased he didn't suffer. That would have been dreadful." I put the plate very carefully on the floor and stood up. "Can I show you something?"

"Of course," said Bram.

"I've never shown anyone this before," I said, going over to pick up a tatty bum bag that sat at the end of the window sill. "Actually I never even told anyone what happened except my mum and Paige but I never showed them this." I brought the bum bag back and sat down again, holding it on my lap. "This was Liam's. He carried it everywhere with him. He kept a voice recorder and a little camera in it just in case he ever needed to record something. They took the recorder and the camera when they arrested him but they left the bum bag. I told Paige because she was my best friend and I had to tell mum because, well, she's my mum but I never showed them this."

"What is it?" asked Bram. His voice was soft and gentle.

"Just an invoice," I said, my voice flat and unemotional. "That's all, just another bill," and I tossed the bum bag over to him. "See for yourself."

He caught the bag, a puzzled frown on his face. He looked at me for a few seconds then slowly unzipped it and looked inside. There was a single sheet of paper there, still neatly folded. He pulled it out and unfolded it.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed and sat there, staring at it. "They only bloody invoiced you for the bullet."

"Six yawns," I said, my voice distant. "That's pretty cheap, don't you think? Six yawns to take one life and destroy another. A bargain

really.”

“I ... I ...” said Bram. “I don't know what to say.”

“There's nothing you can say,” I said, coming back to the present. “See the date of the invoice?”

“Umm, 18th August 2025,” said Bram.

“That was my 25th birthday,” I said, looking at him. “Happy Birthday Natalia and all that.” Then I burst into tears again.

* * *

“Do you know why Liam was arrested?” asked Bram a while later. He'd made some more tea but hadn't bothered to make any more toasties. It was getting dark and he'd put on the floor lamp and left it on low so the room was cosy.

“No,” I said. “Oh, he was charged with sedition, insurgency and terrorism but I never got told any details.”

“So you don't know what he was working on before he was arrested?”

“No idea. I wasn't interested in politics, I was too busy playing happy families. All I know is soon after the surrender he started working on something that he wouldn't talk about. He wouldn't even discuss it with the Editor of The Australian. He said it was too dangerous and the less anyone knew the better until he went public.”

“Do you think it was anything to do with the invasion?” he asked.

“Look, seriously, I have no idea,” I said. “I didn't even know there had been an invasion or what happened to cause it. All I know is we surrendered and now there's Chinese everywhere.”

“Well, I can tell you some of it,” said Bram, “although there are a few puzzling parts.”

“OK, then,” I said. “Not like I've anything better to do tonight.”

“You remember the US Presidential Election of 2024?” he asked in a tone that suggested he expected me to remember.

“Nope,” I said. “Since the news outlets got taken over by the Party I barely even remember there being a United States.”

“Well, they had an election in 2024,” said Bram, “in November. Both sides claimed they’d won and that there had been massive fraud. There were lots of protests and people started bringing guns and there were fights and killings and the usual sort of things that Americans get up to. Then it got serious. A handful of army veterans turned up at a rally with a tank and started firing on the rally. This was in Washington, I think it was. Not too far from the White House. Anyway there were retaliations and an escalation of the weaponry and the fighting spread to all the major towns and cities throughout the country. Aside from the politics there were a lot of local hatred to be resolved as well as racial and religious issues. On Christmas Eve the sitting President finally admitted that the country was in a state of civil war.”

“OK,” I said, “so what’s that got to do with us?”

“Nothing, directly,” said Bram. “It’s just that Australia is a huge country with huge resources and a small population. China, on the other hand, is a huge country with a huge population and rapidly dwindling resources. They’d been eyeing Australia for decades waiting for an opportunity.”

“So the American Civil War was that opportunity?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” said Bram. “A few years before, back in 2021, Australia made a defence deal with the USA and the UK which more or less ended any chance of the Chinese getting their hands on Aussie resources. Then in 2024 the US Civil War started and the Chinese seized the moment. The government in America collapsed in January of 2025 when no one could agree on a president for the inauguration and the military was looking inwards at the civil war, not outwards. Anyway, their system needs presidential approval to get involved in a war and there was no president.”

"Makes sense, I suppose," I said. "What about the Brits though?"

"They were a dead loss," he said, stretching his legs out in front of him. "They'd more or less collapsed economically after leaving the European Union and in no position to help Australia."

"Wouldn't the Europeans help us?" I asked.

"No, they said it was entirely our own fault and we should face the consequences," said Bram.

"Well, that wasn't very nice," I said.

"They had a point," he replied. "You see, in signing up to go with the USA and the UK in 2021 Australia broke all its commitments with Europe, including the cancellation of billions of dollars worth of arms purchases. That really pissed off the Europeans. The Chinese, who have a long history of watching and waiting saw all this and launched a massive invasion force across the Pacific."

"But they never actually invaded, did they?" I asked. "I'm sure even I would have heard something through Twitter or Facebook."

"That's the thing," he said. "Apparently the Aussies got wind of the invasion and we sent our entire navy and air force to block the Chinese. There was a huge air-sea battle mid-Pacific and the Australians got obliterated. The next day we surrendered and the Chinese moved in. They shut down all internal and international communications then slowly re-opened them but under Chinese control. Everything since then has been monitored and controlled."

"Yeah, I remember that," I said. "I tried to talk to my mum in England but there was no internet or phones. When I finally did manage to get through to her she was going out of her mind because of all the rumours that had been flying round in the UK about what was going on here. She thought we'd been killed in one of those protests."

"Well, that's the Chinese way," said Bram, "so you can't really blame her. At the first sign of any form of protest the Chinese clamp down hard so when crowds started to appear not long after the surrender

demanding that the Chinese pull out and leave us alone they were already prepared and waiting.”

“Yeah, Liam was expecting that as well,” I said. “I wanted to go to the protest in Canberra but he wouldn't let me.”

“Lucky for you he didn't” said Bram. “They sent in tanks and soldiers. I forget the figures but a couple of thousand or so were killed in Canberra. Over ten thousand in Sydney and roughly the same in Melbourne. It worked though. Over the next few nights there were a few protests with small numbers of people with petrol bombs and makeshift tank traps that didn't work then it all died out. People were too scared to do anything, especially with tanks and armoured weapons patrolling the streets and soldiers breaking up any groups larger than three or four. No real counter-attack ever got started.”

“Couldn't the army have done something?” I asked. “I've often wondered about that.”

This is where the Chinese are so very clever,” said Bram. “They understand the carrot and stick better than anyone else.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“The stick was the tanks and soldiers,” he said, “which scared most people but they also used the carrot. The day of the surrender they sent out a message to everyone in the army and police saying that they had sworn an oath to defend Australia and Australia still existed, only the government had changed. Anyone who accepted their continuing role in the new army or police would get a 50% pay rise and anyone who would not accept it would be sent for political re-education or executed for treason. Virtually every single one of them accepted their new role. The main argument being that we had already lost the war so their oaths now applied to the new regime. A bit of an iffy argument but given the choice between a big pay rise or death for something that couldn't really be changed I don't imagine many spent too long worrying about it.”

“That's right,” I said. “I remember there was a lot of grumbling but no one I knew was willing to stand up and actually do anything.

Especially when Li Hong promised that everyone's jobs and homes would be protected and that nothing would significantly change."

Li Hong was the Governor of Australia, appointed a couple of days after the Surrender.

"They are a subtle people, I'll give them that," he said. "Keep things the same and get people to accept that then bring in small changes to begin with so people don't get too upset. The more they have accepted things the more and bigger changes you can make later when they've more invested in the status quo. Especially when there are incentives to accept the change and penalties for not accepting. So how come you ended up here?"

"Here?" I asked, surprised at the change of topic. "You mean this house or Juma Creek?"

"Juma Creek," he said. "Why didn't you stay in Canberra with your friends?"

"Ohh," I said, "there was no way I could stay in Canberra after that. I more or less had a breakdown for a few days after Liam ... you know, and then I ran away. Left almost everything behind."

"But why Juma Creek?" he asked.

"That's where Paige was," I said. "She was my best friend all through school then she married Greg who had a small acreage here. When we surrendered and things started to change in Canberra they decided to quit and move to their acreage. Greg got a job selling farm equipment and Paige set up the driving school. I couldn't bear to be anywhere near where ... it ... happened and Juma Creek seemed so remote and safe, even though it's only a few hundred K away. When you live in Canberra you forget just how big Australia actually is. Anyway I got a friend to sell what she could of what we had in Canberra and bought in to Paige's business."

"So you don't have anything of Liam's left?" he asked. "His papers, computers or anything?"

"The police took all his stuff," I said. "Everything. All they left were general things like the TV and washing machine and stuff and things that were obviously mine, like clothes and toiletries. They even slit the mattress open to look inside. All I have left of Liam is that bum bag and a few photos on my phone."

"Right," he said with a sigh. "And you've no idea what he was working on when he was arrested?"

"None," I said. "Why?"

"Oh, just curious," he said.

"Sure," I said. "Curious enough to spend thirty eight thousand yawns to find out, huh."

"What do you mean?" he said, a suspiciously long time later.

"I know I'm not looking my best," I said, "and I admit I haven't for a long time but I'm not stupid. You don't need driving lessons. It was obvious after the first few minutes."

"Ahh," he said, looking a little sheepish. "I thought I'd covered it quite well."

"You weren't uncertain enough," I said, "and you didn't make the sorts of mistakes that beginners make."

"OK, I concede that," he said.

"And then you completely gave the game away at the cafe," I said. "You drove me home and in the process showed you were a practised driver, not someone with only an hour behind them."

"Well, I had to get you away," he said with a grin, "before Katie started photographing me make you cry and I lost all my social credits for being anti-social."

"And just because I've been wallowing in self pity all evening, it doesn't mean I've forgotten what you said," I added. "Your name isn't

Bram Tanner and you don't exist. I've answered your two questions. I think it's time you explained yourself."

"And more fully than I expected," he said, stopping grinning but continuing to look cheerful. "I can certainly see why you hate the Chinese and why you hid in this place."

"I didn't hide," I said. "I came here as an escape but not to hide, except maybe from the horror. Just a minute." I held up a finger while a half formed thought coalesced inside my tear soaked brain. "You've been looking for me, haven't you. That's why you're saying 'hiding' and why you wanted me to be your instructor, not Paige. Hah! She thought it was because you fancied me!"

"You are certainly not unattractive," he said. "I don't think it's unreasonable for her to think that."

"But you didn't come looking for driving lessons when you can already drive and ask for me because you fancied me," I said. "You could have found a much cheaper way to get to meet me."

"Probably not," he said. "You are surprisingly difficult to meet."

"Well, OK, I'll concede that," I said. "I don't want to be met."

"And having met you, I'd say you're well worth thirty eight thousand," he said, his smile returning, "although I don't think 'yawns' is the best word."

"God, you're smooth," I said with a laugh. Having been in the depths of darkness not that long before it was nice to be cheered up so rapidly. "So, I'm waiting."

He tapped his fingers on one knee a few times.

"OK, I admit it," he said. "I have been looking for you. For several years, actually. You don't look anything like your picture."

"My picture?" I said in surprise. "What picture?"

"This one," he said, pulling out his phone. He swiped his thumb a few times then held it up for me to see.

"Holy crap!" I said in total astonishment. I reached out to take the phone and stared at the younger, happier prettier me. "Where on earth did you get this?"

"You posted it on Facebook, years ago," he said.

"I know," I said. "I remember. Liam took it when we went out to celebrate after deciding to get married. God, I look so young and innocent."

"You're hardly an old hag now," he said. "Although you have lost weight."

"Yeah, there's nothing like having your fiancée executed live on TV for killing your appetite," I said drily, still staring at the picture and comparing it to what I'd been seeing in the mirror recently. Losing some weight wasn't that bad as I'd been a little on the chubby side back then but maybe I should go back to see a hairdresser again and maybe get a new outfit. Some skin cream wouldn't hurt either.

"So, what, you're saying you fell in love with my picture on Facebook eight years ago?" I said, passing his phone back. "I don't remember you as one of my friends then."

"Sadly, no," he said. "I'm not in love with you, although if circumstances were different, perhaps ..."

"So why have you been looking for me?" I said.

"The main reason is Liam," he said, getting up, "although another reason has popped up very recently. Shall I make some more tea?"

"No, sit down," I said. "Why Liam?"

"No one knows why he was arrested and ... you know," he said. "I've been looking for you in the hope that you knew or maybe had something that would help explain it."

“Why do you want to know?” I asked.

“He was the only journalist arrested for sedition and related offences,” said Bram. “They clamped down on the news outlets and made quite a lot of threats as well as offering incentives to tow the line but Liam was arrested. That can only mean he was onto something that was too serious to deal with in another way.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “or maybe he was just an example to show what might happen to the others if they didn’t fall into line.”

“Unlikely,” said Liam. “They would have arrested him much sooner if he was to set an example. No, the timing suggests that he started to investigate something around the time of the surrender and was getting close to making a revelation. It had to be stopped so they arrested him in the middle of the night, put on a show trial and executed him a week later.”

“Was it only a week?” I asked, putting my hand to my head. “Jesus, it felt like years.”

Bram just shrugged. After all, what can you say?

“I don’t know anything,” I said, “and everything of his is gone so you wasted your time and money. Oh, and don’t expect Paige to give it back. She can be very tenacious.”

“Oh, keep it,” he said. “Just meeting you was worth every cent.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said outwardly sarcastic but inwardly feeling better than I had for a very long time. “And the other reason?”

“Your name came up in a Juma Creek Municipality Meeting recently,” he said.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “You’ve been looking for me because I don’t use social media? I don’t understand.”

“Well, no,” he said puzzled. “OK, the fact you don’t use social media is why it’s taken so long to find you but no, that’s not the reason.”

“So what is the reason?” I asked.

“The NSW South Eastern Border District Committee is implementing a Community Benevolence Program,” said Bram. “The idea is to use Party funds to support local businesses and promote benevolence and friendship among the general population. Your driving school is one of the businesses that’s been chosen to participate.”

“Well, that’s very nice of them,” I said. “Some money would be very useful. What does participation mean?”

“It means they going to send some of their political staff to you for driver training,” said Bram.

“OK,” I said. “So why have you been looking for me to tell me that? I’d be finding out soon enough anyway.”

“It’s not that simple,” he said.

“I had a feeling it wouldn’t be,” I replied.

He shrugged.

“When your name appeared in the minutes I was alerted and came to find you because you might well have been the missing Natalia Hadlow that I’ve been looking for,” he said. “And, since it turns out that you are, indeed, her it gives rise to something else. Hence my two questions.”

“I’m sure all this is obvious to you,” I said, “but I’m lost. Don’t ever go into teaching.”

“Well, asking you why you have no lovers was to find out if you were Liam Kelly’s fiancée,” he said.

“And the other question?” I asked.

“That was to find out your feeling about the Chinese,” he said.

“Wouldn’t they be pretty obvious given what happened to Liam?” I

asked.

“Not necessarily,” he said. “Sometimes people can swing the opposite way. I think it's called the Stockholm Syndrome.”

“Difficult to follow,” I said, “but OK. Now you know I hate the bastards, so what?”

Well,” he said, trying out a half smile to see if his charm still worked. “I was rather hoping you'd work with me to destroy them.”

Chapter Five

"You what?" I exclaimed. Not the best comeback, I admit, but his request had come out of left field.

"Not just me," he confessed. "I'm just one of several but it would be me you work with."

"Back up a bit," I said. "Who are you? Who are the others?"

"ACT NOW!," he said. "We're a resistance movement, based in the ACT, obviously."

"Are you serious?" I said. "Act Now?"

"I know," he said sadly, "but all the good ones were already taken. I liked the Australian Liberation Army but got overruled. It was considered too Islamic."

I shook my head to try to clear it.

"Yeah, whatever," I said, closing my eyes for a moment or two. "I'm not going to argue abbreviations or acronyms or whatever they are. Are you seriously telling me that you're in some anti-Chinese organisation? You're a terrorist?"

"We're not terrorists," said Bram. "The Chinese are."

"Yeah, I bet they see that a little differently," I said. "So what's your real name?"

"I'll tell you if you really want me to," he said. "I'm prepared to trust you but it would be dangerous for me if that name got into the wrong hands."

"Then don't," I said. "I really don't want that kind of responsibility. As far as I'm concerned you are Bram Tanner and there's no need for me to know any different."

"So will you help us?" he asked, sagging slightly with relief.

“With what?” I asked, folding my arms and crossing my legs defensively.

“Collecting information,” he said. “You’re going to be working closely with several political officials fairly high up in the NSW South Eastern Border District hierarchy. They may drop some useful snippets of information.”

“So you want me to spy on the Chinese for you?” I asked.

“Yes, basically,” he said. “For all their fancy words about equality they’re still pretty sexist and won’t consider a female driving instructor anyone of any consequence. There’s a good chance that some of them may say something to you or in front of you that they would never say in front of a man. Perhaps even leave some documents or a USB stick lying around.”

I closed my eyes and put my hands to my head as I tried to come to terms with this.

“I’ll understand if you turn me down,” said Bram quietly. “This is actually our biggest problem. Australia is full of wealthy people and companies who’ll hand over vast amounts of money to help us force the Chinese out but very few people will actually do anything. They have families to think of and stable lives, even if they’re dictated to by foreigners.”

“And you think I’ll be more willing to help you because I have no family?” I asked. “I’m guessing if I’m caught it’ll be more than just losing a few social credits.”

“I was hoping you’d help because of Liam,” said Bram. “He was on to something and it cost him his life so it must have been important.”

“Even after all this time?” I asked.

Bram sighed. “We have a fundamental psychological problem here in Australia. Well, not just Australia, any country that’s been invaded or taken over. Studies have shown conclusively that any insurrection must have legitimacy in the eyes of the general population for it to succeed.

If the rebels don't have popular legitimacy they will always lose in the end.”

“And ACT NOW! doesn't have legitimacy?” I asked. “Why do it then?”

“It's the psychology,” he said. “We were beaten in a war so, even though people don't like the Chinese, that losing was a form of legitimacy. It's almost like people accept the Chinese won the right to rule so, apart from a few small groups of rebels, most people accept the situation.”

“I'd say it's more that people are scared of being killed,” I said drily. “And you think Liam's article will give you that legitimacy?”

“Well, hope,” said Bram. “Maybe he came across something and we can use that to shake the attitudes of Australians. We're running out of time, after all.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It happened seven years ago,” he said. “Plenty of people have died since then and everyone under, say, twelve, has grown up knowing only Chinese rule. The longer things go on like this the fewer people there will be who remember anything different, anything about an 'Australian way'.”

“Well, yes, I can see that,” I said. I thought for a few moments. “And you think me spying on the Chinese will help?”

I was feeling a little confused. My head was beginning to spin as it had been a very stressful day.

“Nothing directly,” he said. “Liam was the original reason I was looking for you. Even though you say Liam didn't leave anything behind it's possible he let something slip so I'm hoping that we can spend some time together just talking about that time. You never know, you may remember something, something that seems trivial but which gives us a clue.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I said. “Let's go back to that bit about me getting

caught. I'm guessing I'd be executed just like Liam was."

"Probably not," said Bram.

"Why not?" I demanded. "Wouldn't it be treason or terrorism or something like that?"

"Yes," he said, "but I doubt they'd execute you."

"Why not?"

"Umm, you're a woman," he said, studying his finger nails. "They'd find other uses for you."

It took a few moments for that to sink in.

"No way," I said, forcefully.

"There'd be very little risk," said Bram, perhaps a trifle unconvincingly. "It's not like you'd be actively looking for information, just telling me about any conversations you had or things you overheard. There'd be nothing to link you to anything."

"That's bullshit and you know it," I said. "All it takes is for you and your faffing friends to do something based on what I told you and someone to remember they told me about it. It wouldn't take long for them to put two and two together."

"It's very unlikely," said Bram. "Like I said, we don't have enough people so we don't really actually do much. Mostly we just collect information and spread it out among the other groups we're affiliated with. One of them might do something but no one would be able to connect you with it."

"No," I said.

"Not even for Liam?" he asked.

"Emotional blackmail won't work," I said, "and anyway, I know for certain that Liam would never let me put myself in harm's way. He'd

be horrified that I was even listening to you.”

“Oh, well, it was a long shot,” said Bram. “Like I said, very few people are actually willing to do anything.”

“And I can't give you any donations,” I said. “I barely get by as it is.”

“Yeah, I did notice your fridge wasn't well stocked,” he said and stood up. “Right, then, I'd best be off. My just being here could potentially put you at risk. Are you sure you'll be OK? You have had rather an emotionally draining day.”

“I'll be fine,” I said, getting up as well. “It's not like any of these emotions are particularly new.”

He walked towards the door and I followed. I'm not sure why, most likely to check he'd shut the door behind him.

“Umm, there won't be any need for more driving lessons,” he said. “I'll be moving on in the morning and disappear from your life.”

“OK,” I said and opened the front door. “What do I tell John if he asks why you aren't at the meeting next Wednesday?”

“Oh, umm, good question,” he said and thought for a few moments. “Tell him I've gone back to WA.”

“OK,” I said.

“I'll say goodbye, then,” said Bram, stepping through the doorway. “Oh, and, umm, it was delightful meeting you.”

“I wish I could say the same,” I said. “Goodbye,” and shut the door behind him.

I leaned back against the closed door with my eyes shut for a few moments then swore and pulled the door open again. He'd just stepped onto the footpath beside the nature strip.

“Bram,” I called. “Bram, come back,” and waved my arm at him to

come back.

He hurried back and paused at the doorway.

“Come inside,” I said. “This isn't going to work.”

“What isn't?” he asked, coming inside.

“We have a schedule,” I said. “and the system knows you should be logged in to the car according to the schedule. If you don't turn up for your lessons someone will come to find out why, especially if we haven't refunded your money.”

“So refund the money,” he said.

“We can't,” I said. “Paige has already spent some of it. Rent and stuff, plus some back wages for us both.”

“If you do a refund I could arrange for some other funds to find their way into your accounts,” he said.

“That wouldn't work,” I said. “We have so little going through the bank that anything like that would stand out like a sore thumb.”

“This could be a problem,” he said. “Can I sit down?”

“Sure,” I said and we both sat down.

“The thing is,” said Bram, “my permits are OK up to a point. They're good enough for a cursory look but they wouldn't stand up to a full examination. I can't risk someone investigating me.”

“It was a mistake to pay for the full one hundred hours,” I said. “You'd have been better off just doing a Discovery Hour.”

“In hindsight, yes,” he said, “but I expected to be able to get to know you over an extended period and paying for the full thing gave me some leverage to make sure I got you as the instructor. It's just a shame that you told John about me which forced my hand after just one session.”

“So you're saying this is all my fault?” I said, flaring up.

“Oh god, no,” he said, waving his hands to placate me. “If you hadn't told John, someone else would have. I didn't think it through enough.”

“Hmm, OK,” I said calming down again. “So what are you going to do?”

“Buggered if I know,” he said. He stood up again. “Well, I'll give it some serious thought. Bye again.”

“Bye,” I said, a little distractedly as a thought was building in my mind. “No, hold on.”

“Why?” he asked, halfway to the door.

I was pretty sure Mrs Mineski in the other half of the duplex would be starting to wonder about this man who kept coming and going after several years of me having no visitors, but that wasn't the thought that was building.

“I don't know if this would work,” I said, “but what if we rearrange the schedule so you get a lot more hours in quickly then you can cancel and get a refund when you've done enough hours to cover what we've already spent. It'll seriously piss Paige off but shouldn't arouse any suspicions. People do cancel these things.”

“How many hours would I need to do?” he asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “I can ask Paige how much she's spent and work it out. I'd be surprised if you had to stay more than, say, a week, if you do three or four hours a day. Not even Paige will have spent more than a quarter of the money.”

* * *

“You ready?” I asked when the door opened.

“I suppose,” said Bram. “I'm still not happy about going to the Village Residents' Meeting though. I don't want to draw attention to myself.”

"You have no choice," I said. "They're compulsory and John knows you're here so you'll draw more attention if you don't go. Ready?"

He pulled the door shut. "OK, let's get it over with. Where is it?"

"At the end of the street," I said, "at Wu Wei Qi's house."

We walked rather than drove since it wasn't far.

"Nice place," said Bram when he saw it.

It was a solidly built, uninspired brick house on about two acres. It wasn't palatial or even particularly tasteful but compared to the weatherboard duplexes with next to no yard that occupied the surrounding streets it was a 'nice place'.

"The Party built it for him," I said. "It used to be a field used for grazing horses but when the Village was defined and the Committee set up, the Party commandeered the field and built the house so there'd be somewhere big enough to hold meetings. Normally only one representative of each house is expected to turn up but this is a Special Meeting so there could be a couple of hundred. Wu has a huge covered patio at the back, overlooking the woods, for meetings."

"Did they build houses for John and the other Committee members as well?" he asked.

"No," I said glancing at him. "John and Teresa are elected each year so there'd be problems if someone else got elected, not that that's likely. Wu's permanent and most likely when he moves on the next Secretary the Party sends will get the house. How come you don't know this?"

"I don't actually live anywhere," he said quietly, as there were other people walking to the meeting as well, "so I'm not part of any Village. So are John and Teresa a couple?"

"Oh no," I said. "Teresa's married. I've forgotten to who. Ron, Don, something like that. John's a bachelor, lives with his mum."

"How long have they been on the Committee?" he asked.

"For ever," I said. "No one else wanted to do it. John's one of these inadequate little people who need to be on piddly little committees to feel important and Teresa, well, Teresa's easily manipulated. They both get re-elected uncontested every year."

We turned into Wu's driveway and followed several other people down the path beside the garage, which contained Wu's big electric 6WD status symbol, to the patio. It was already crowded with half the seats taken and people milling around the two barbecues.

"I usually sit there," I whispered to Bram and pointed to the end seat of the last row. It was the seat nearest the path back to the road. "For a quick getaway. Do you want a burnt sausage?"

"Not especially," he whispered back. "Why burnt?"

"Somehow Wu got it into his head that Aussies love burnt sausages at barbecues," I whispered, grabbing my usual seat. Bram sat next to me. "No one dares tell him otherwise and he dishes them up every time. He thinks the people love him for it."

"So which one is Wu?" he said, looking over at the two Chinese men slaving over the barbecues.

"He's up the front," I said, pointing to the short, thin Chinese man sitting on a raised podium at the front. "Those are just Army cooks."

"Oh, right," said Bram shifting his gaze. "Who are the two men sitting next to him?"

"The fat one's John," I said. "I don't know who the other is. I don't see Teresa anywhere. She should be on the podium as well."

The people around me were familiar as they were my neighbours but most I didn't know well enough to talk to. I nodded to a few who nodded back and noticed Bram getting a fair number of questioning looks. Quite a few from women, unsurprisingly, as he was better looking than any of the other men there. Better dressed, too, since Juma Creek is predominantly a farming community.

“Well, hello stranger!” said a voice behind me.

“Oh, hello, Ted,” I said, turning.

“Been a while since we saw you at one of these,” he said. He had two burnt sausages in rolls in his hand and tomato sauce was dripping slowly onto the straining material of his shirt.

“To my great disappointment, Ted,” I said. “Still, it's good to be here today to show my enthusiastic support,” and I lifted a clenched fist to show just how supportive I was.

“And who might this be?” he asked, pointing at Bram with his chin.

“This is Bram,” I said. “He's only recently moved here. This is his first meeting.”

“Good on ya, mate,” said Ted. “Want a sausage?”

“Oh, no thank you,” said Bram, moving his leg so tomato sauce didn't land on his trousers. “I've already eaten.”

“Where's Teresa?” I asked. “It's not like her to be late.”

“Who?” said Ted.

“Teresa,” I said, frowning. “She's on the Committee.”

“Teresa?” he said, scowling. “Nah, don't know no Teresa. Wu Wei Qi, John and Derek are the ones on the Committee.”

“Derek?” I said. “I don't know him. When was he elected?”

“Ohh, back in '28,” said Ted, his scowl turning to a frown. “When we set up the Village. Don't you remember? You were here then, weren't you?”

“I was,” I said, “but we elected John and Teresa, and she's been at every meeting since.”

“Nah, love,” he said. “Always been Derek. Oops, gotta go. John's about to start the meeting.”

He hurried off to join his wife, near the front.

“Who was that?” whispered Bram.

“Ted,” I said quietly. “He's related to John in some way, I think. I don't understand what's happened to Teresa. I don't see her husband here either.”

The quiet background chatter died away as John got to his feet and beamed importantly around. Derek looked a little tense but Wu was as relaxed as ever. He rarely spoke at meetings and always wore the same outfit, a pale blue suit that buttoned at the neck and looked a little like a uniform but had no insignia.

“Nice to see you all here,” began John, ignoring the fact that we had to be here, on pain of some re-education program. “I've a couple of fairly big announcements which will benefit our Village but first I can give you two updates on matters that were raised at the last monthly Residents' Meeting.”

There was no visible reaction in the people around me so I guessed that the matters raised hadn't been of overwhelming importance. Those I could see sat there with a glazed look and a fixed smile on their faces. Having said that we were all at the back. Perhaps those who were more enthused were at the front and tensely poised on their seats to express their joy at whatever the updates were.

“Firstly,” said John, “the planned road repairs. Following on from my enquiry after concerns were raised at the last meeting, the Juma Creek People's Committee for Roads and Transport have informed me that the repairs to the road around the storm drain at the junction of Wattle and McCain will be completed within two days and there will be no need for any night work. This is good news for those who live around that corner. Work should commence within the next two months.”

He paused for a moment as if expecting applause or expressions of

gratitude but none were forthcoming. Even Wu seemed faintly disinterested. Probably because there were no political ramifications to repairing a storm drain. As I lived a fair way from that corner and was usually out during the day I doubted that I'd even notice and, frankly, road repairs are just something you put up with for the greater good. With a faint air of disappointment, John continued.

"Secondly, the issue of garbage being left behind when the bins are emptied. Two or three people raised this at the last meeting and since then enquiries have been made," and he turned to glance at Wu who nodded and looked serious. "It transpires that one member of the garbage collection team was not sufficiently committed to the Social Welfare Program and failed, deliberately, to pick up any garbage that had fallen from the bins when they were emptied. That team member has been replaced on the team and is, I believe," and he again glanced at Wu for confirmation, "undergoing Community Re-education."

Again no particular response was forthcoming. Perhaps we were feeling a little sorry for the garbage collector.

"I am happy to report," continued John, beaming again, "that Juma Creek Sanitation Department has formally thanked our Village for its diligence in reporting the issue. Those Residents who reported the garbage will be awarded twenty Social Credits in the next few days and every Resident who did not will have two Social Credits deducted to encourage you to take a more proactive role in our Community."

"That doesn't seem fair," said a solid looking man in some brown overalls two rows in front of me. I vaguely recognised him as a tradie of some sort. "I'm off to work before the garbage trucks arrive. How would I know if they're not doing their job right?"

"That's a fair point, Fred," said John, "and one I'll escalate to Wu Wei Qi."

He stepped slightly to one side and looked at Wu expectantly. Wu slowly got to his feet, his face as inscrutable as ever.

"I wi' waise matteh wi' Duma Ceeka Municipality Secwetawy," he said

in his fairly poor English. He nodded sharply then sat down again. He always said that whenever anything was referred to him during a meeting. I'd rather formed the impression it was the equivalent of 'shut up and stop bothering me', as there was little point continuing after he'd said it and we had no way of checking whether he did anything or not.

"Yes, thank you for that, Wei Qi," said John, happy now that the matter had been dealt with. As far as I could tell from the back of Fred's head he wasn't too happy but had no choice other than to shut up. He muttered something to the woman sitting beside him and she nodded in agreement. "Now to the first of the announcements. I am happy to report that, starting from next Monday, any Social Credits we have in excess of the base one thousand credits can be used towards staple foods, at the rate of one Australian Yuan for one credit. These foods include rice, potatoes, pasta and beans and the Social Credits can be used at designated stores and supermarkets. I will send you a list of all approved stores and food brands in the next twenty four hours." He paused then raised his arms as if praising some deity and raised his voice. "This is good news, isn't it! The Community benefits from your actions on behalf of the Community and now you do too, directly!"

He looked as though he was about to wet himself with excitement and there were some murmurs as people digested this exciting piece of good news. I supposed it was good news in a way as we could now dob in a criminal or someone with anti-social behaviours and buy food at the same time although we were already able to use those excess credits towards our electricity bills. Mind you, I tended not to have many credits over the base thousand so it was unlikely that I'd be able to buy any staples as I rarely had any credits to offset against my electricity bills.

It occurred to me that I could start going out of my way to report anti-social behaviour and buy staples that didn't need cooking, thereby saving on the electricity as well. Then it occurred to me that I might even be able to pay my current outstanding electricity bill by reporting Bram and I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, wondering how much he might net me. It was several moments before it occurred to me that encouraging us, the general Australian public,

to report on each other was probably the whole point of the exercise and I dismissed reporting Bram from my head. As an afterthought, it occurred to me that probably quite a few people would be only too happy to report other people to save a little cash on their groceries. I was just beginning to wonder how long it would be until we started being directly paid to report things when I realised John was continuing, no doubt with the other big announcement.

Chapter Six

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” I hissed at Bram when John had finished making his second announcement. “Quick,” and I jumped up.

Other people seemed to be quite shocked, for some reason, and there was quite a hubbub of talking as it was discussed. Bram seemed dismayed and he just sat there, his face battling between inscrutability and concern.

“Come on,” I hissed, pulling at his sleeve.

“What?” he said, looking up, “oh, yes.”

He got up and started to follow me but it was too late. John had left Wu and Derek on the podium to deal with any matters arising and was bearing down on us with a determined look on his face.

“Natalia,” he said, breathing a little heavily as he caught up with us on the path beside the garage. “Natalia, I wonder if I might have a quick word?”

“Oh shit,” I whispered angrily to myself then turned with a bright smile. “John! Shouldn’t you be answering questions?”

“Oh, Derek can handle it for the moment,” he said. “I saw you and noticed you were with a stranger.” He turned to Bram. “Hello, I’m John, Chairman of the Village Residents’ Association and a good friend of Natalia’s. You must be Bram Tanner. Welcome to the Community!”

“Ahh, thank you,” said Bram, taking the proffered hand. He shook it then quickly let go.

“I believe you’ve moved into Blue Gum Street,” said John. “Number 14?”

“Umm, that’s right,” said Bram, glancing at me.

“I’ve not yet had formal notification of your move,” said John, “but

these things do sometimes take time. I am a little confused, though.”

“Oh?” said Bram. “Why’s that?”

“Number 14 is Ronnie Bradham’s old place,” said John. “I haven’t been told he’s sold the house.”

“I’m renting it,” said Bram. “Just for a few months.”

“I see,” said John. “So you’re Ronnie’s lodger?”

“No, I’m renting the whole house,” said Bram. “I believe Ronnie’s moved up the coast, to Eden. I think he’s gone to stay with his son. Some sort of illness, although I’m not sure.”

John looked at him in confusion. “This is most irregular,” he said. “I’ve not had a copy of Ronnie’s migration approval nor of any approval for the rental of his house. In fact, I don’t even recall him having a son. You’re from Western Australia, aren’t you? How do you know Ronnie?”

“Umm, yes, that’s right,” said Bram. “From Kalgoorlie. I, umm, used to know Ronnie there, many years ago, back before the Surrender.”

“We refer to it as the Emancipation here,” said John, the corners of his mouth turned down with distaste at the word ‘Surrender’, “although Western Australia does have its strange ways.”

“Yes, my apologies, I meant the Emancipation, of course,” said Bram hastily.

“Still, I don’t remember seeing any mention of Western Australia in Ronnie’s records,” said John. “This is all very irregular.”

“It’s all perfectly legitimate,” said Bram. “As you can see I am here and living at number 14. The records will catch up eventually I’m sure. Do you want to see my migration and residency permits?”

It was clear that John would very much have liked to look at those permits but he was torn between his sense of bureaucracy and an unwillingness to offend a new resident so soon, especially one who

was so open and apparently vouched for by me, a long term Resident and one he had designs on.

“Oh, no need, no need,” he said as breezily as he could. “Although, perhaps, if the records haven't arrived in the next day or two I could drop by and check a few details?”

“By all means,” said Bram. “I'll, err, look forward to it.”

“Excellent, excellent,” said John, rubbing his hands together. He half turned to go back to the meeting then turned back again. “And what did you think of the news, Bram?”

“Oh, um, very positive,” said Bram. “Yes, definitely a step in the right direction. Or two, rather. Two steps, yes.”

“Definitely,” said John happily. “And you, my dear, you felt the same?”

“Oh absolutely,” I said, trying to sound positive. “I think both, umm, strategies, will benefit the community. Definitely.”

“Excellent,” he said. “Well, I must get back to the meeting. Love to stay and chat but duty calls. Are you sure you both won't stay for sausages and coffee?”

“I'd love to,” said Bram, “but I'm still unpacking.”

“And I'm helping,” I said, feeling I needed to give some explanation that seemed community minded.

John looked suspiciously at me, no doubt wondering what sort of relationship I had with Bram and where he, John, now stood.

“Shame, shame,” he said, “well, I must go.”

“Oh, John,” I said as he was about to hurry off. “Is Teresa ill? I didn't see her at the meeting.”

John froze. “Teresa?” he said. “I don't think I know a Teresa. Is she in this Village?”

“Are you serious?” I asked. “She’s on the Committee, with you.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” said John. “Derek’s on the Committee. And Wei Qi, of course.”

“So when did that happen?” I asked. “Aren’t the re-elections due in a few months?”

“End of January,” said John, automatically. “But Derek’s been on the Committee since the beginning. I know you don’t always come to the meetings but you must have voted for his re-election several times.”

“I’ve never seen Derek before,” I said. “I’ve certainly never voted for him. I’ve always voted for Teresa.”

“Oh, Natalia,” said John patronisingly. “I never know when you are having fun with me or not. It’s one of the many things I like about you. By the way, you never said when it would be convenient for me to come round and start working with you on your community development.”

“Ahh, I’ll let you know,” I said, instantly on the defensive. “By the way, I joined WeChat.”

“Yes, I know,” said John, “and I thought your first posting was very supportive. I’m sure you’ll be putting up several highly positive postings about the new policies as well. I’m looking forward to reading them. By the way, I’ve sent you a friend request. Let me know your social media identities, too, Bram and I’ll friend you as well.”

“First thing in the morning,” said Bram. “Friends are always good.”

“Definitely,” said John. “Got to rush, sorry.”

“No, that’s all right,” I said. “You have your duty to perform.”

“Ahh, duty,” said John. “I slept and dreamt that life was beauty,” and he gave me a significant look which I pretended not to see while suppressing a shudder, “and woke to find that life was duty.”

He hurried off.

“Shit, bugger, damnation and bloody hell,” said Bram quietly but forcefully when we were some way down the street.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“I've got a day, possibly two, before that interfering bloody bureaucratic little bastard comes looking for me,” he said.

“Is that going to be a problem?” I asked.

“Of course it is,” he said. “I haven't got a permit to live there. I have no idea who this Ronnie Whatsit is and I'm sure as hell not paying him any rent.”

“Ahh,” I said. “This could be a problem then. Didn't you do any checks before you moved in?”

“Obviously not enough,” he said. “I understood the permits had been put through but it seems only the ones given to me were.”

“So what are you going to do?” I asked.

“Not a lot I can do,” he said. “I'm just going to have to disappear, and soon.”

“Oh,” I said, flatly.

I was a little surprised that the thought of him disappearing bothered me. After all I barely knew him and I actively avoided having people in my life anyway. Still, he seemed to be a nice guy and he was easy on the eye. I suppose it was also possible that I admired him since he was trying to do something for Australia, however small and shady, and that was something I wasn't prepared to risk myself.

“Would you like to come in for a coffee?” he asked, breaking my reverie.

I looked up from watching my feet on the pavement to see we were

outside his place, or Ronnie's place.

My instinct was to say no but there were things I wanted to talk about and I didn't have that many people to talk to.

"Love one," I said, my voice sounding over perky even to me.

His place was broadly similar to mine but tidier, with no piles of washing, done or waiting, lying around. In fact, it looked almost as though no one was living there. As I sat down on the couch I realised that was probably the case. Bram was most likely camping there rather than living.

"Milk, sugar?" he asked, heading for the small kitchen.

"Yes and no," I called back.

Ronnie's taste in decoration was almost diametrically opposite to mine so rather than gaze at a variety of pictures of old sports cars and racehorses I pulled out my phone. It took a while to find where the past minutes of the Village Residents' Association were held since I'd never been interested enough to look at any before.

"What the hell is going on?" I said loudly after checking the last three months' worth that I'd actually attended.

"What's up?" asked Bram, coming back in with two chocolate brown mugs. He put one on the window sill beside me and sat at the far end of the couch.

"I'm looking at old meeting minutes," I said, "and Teresa isn't mentioned. They're all Derek, whoever he is."

"OK," said Bram. "How far back have you gone?"

"Umm, seven months," I said.

"And you're sure she was on the committee?" he asked. "Not just helping with the sausages or something like that?"

“Course I’m bloody sure,” I said irritably. “I damned well voted for her.”

“When was she first elected?” he asked.

“A few months after I moved here,” I said, scrolling back through the list of meeting dates. “June ’26. Let me just look at these.”

I scanned the minutes of the first meeting and the election results. John had been elected Chairman and Derek as Member unanimously, with 207 votes each, and there had been no other candidates.

“But ...,” I muttered, shaking my head in confusion, “but ... I distinctly remember ... what the hell is going on?”

Bram put down his coffee mug and reached over and took my hand.

“I think you are beginning to see the reality here,” he said quietly.

“What reality?” I demanded, snatching my hand back. “That I’m imagining things? That I’m going mad?”

“I don’t know if you’re going mad,” he said. “I don’t know you well enough. But these things have happened before.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, picking another file of minutes at random.

“It is not unknown for people to disappear,” he said quietly. “And all record of them expunged.”

“What?” I said, looking up at him. “What do you mean ‘disappear’?”

“Exactly that,” he said. “I think if you go to Teresa’s house or where she worked you’ll find other people there. Any document or record of her will have someone else’s name. Like those minutes.”

“So you’re saying someone has gone back and changed all the minutes?” I said.

"It only takes a few seconds," said Bram. "A global search and replace."

"But where is she?" I asked, "and her husband and their kids?"

"They could be dead," he said, "or at the Fourteen Rivers Project, or somewhere else. No one knows."

"Dead!" I exclaimed loudly then looked around in case someone had heard me. "What?"

"It's what they do," he said, picking up his mug again. "With people they want to get rid of. Sometimes they do a public execution to set an example, as they did with Liam but other times the people just disappear. Teresa is now a non-person. It's as though she never existed. Same with her family. They've simply been deleted and you'll never find any trace of them in any document. You didn't happen to keep any hard copies of the minutes, did you?"

"As if," I said, trying to get my head around what he was telling me. "I've never even read any, before now."

"There you go then," he said. "She doesn't exist."

"But ..." I started then stopped.

"What did she do?" asked Bram and I nodded, my brain unable to form the words. "No idea. Maybe she didn't do anything. Could be her husband pissed them off or one of her children or maybe she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. We'll never know."

"But why doesn't someone do something?" I said, getting angry.

"Do what?" he asked. "Everyone else knows about Teresa and ..."

"What do you mean everyone else knows?" I said. Well, screeched might be a better word.

"You heard John," said Bram, "and that other guy with the sauce down his shirt. They both denied any knowledge of her. I'm willing to bet if

you ask anyone else they will too, unless ...” He stopped and looked faintly embarrassed.

“Unless what?” I said sharply.

He sighed. “Unless they’ve been as withdrawn as you,” he said.

“I’m not withdrawn,” I said tersely.

“How many people have you spoken to recently?” he asked. “Apart from Paige and a few students?”

“Lots of people,” I said.

“Name some,” he replied.

“Umm, Raj,” I said racking my brain.

“Yeah, I don’t mean people in shops,” he said. “Who in this Village?”

I thought for a while then had to admit I hadn’t been overly chatty with my neighbours.

“Word spreads quickly,” said Bram, “but you do have to talk to people for the word to reach you.”

“So you’re saying everyone else knows?” I asked.

“Probably,” he said. “There might be one or two other recluses like you but most will know and they’ll be too scared to do anything or even talk about it much. You saw that guy with the sausages. He obviously didn’t want to talk about Teresa.”

The word ‘recluse’ stung but in my heart I knew it to be true. I went to work and was sociable enough, just enough, but outside of work I kept to myself and stayed protected by my walls, both real and metaphorical.

Bram sat and watched the conflicting emotions that must have been crossing my face. Outrage panic, fear and a few others I didn’t have

names for.

“Oh,” I said finally. There didn't seem much else to say.

“Oh indeed,” he said. “Don't forget your coffee.”

I automatically reached for it and took a sip without tasting it.

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“Teresa?” he asked.

“Well, I suppose,” I said, “but all these non-people generally.”

“I can't tell you about Teresa because I don't know,” he said, “but I'm guessing it happened some time after the last meeting you went to. Generally, well, it's been slowly building over the last few years. Even you must have seen the ever increasing restrictions and diminishing privacy.”

I opened my mouth to make a nasty remark about his 'even you' then my brain cut in and I had to admit that, yes, things had changed. I'd just been accepting and uncaring of them.

“But haven't they been good things?” I said. “Like the identifying of people who use a car. It's almost impossible to steal one now or hide after a hit and run.”

“That's part of the problem,” he said. “A lot of people actually applaud the level of government control since they feel safer. I take your point about not being able to steal your car but do they really need to check that I'm driving it according to the schedule or investigate if I decide to skip a lesson? Isn't that my choice, my freedom to do that?”

“I've never really thought about it,” I said. “Isn't it just checking that everything is all right with you? What if someone had done something to you in order to steal your refund for cancelled lessons or something?”

“Oh, come on,” said Bram. “What are the chances of that happening? Anyway, it's the easiest thing in the world for a totalitarian regime to justify loss of freedoms in the name of security. It doesn't even need to be a totalitarian regime. Look at all the restrictions that came in when that pandemic hit back in, what, 2020, 2019. Tens or even hundreds of thousands in Australia alone were forced into house arrest in the name of public safety.”

“But wasn't that a good thing?” I said. “Australia had very few people die from that thing compared to other countries. America went the other way and look what happened to them. Millions dead and then the Civil War.”

“OK, that was probably a bad example,” said Bram. “But look at what's happening now. You can use your Social Credits to buy food but only from approved stores. That means you couldn't chuck in the driving school and set up a shop because you'd have no customers unless you got approved and towed the line, their line, and they can withdraw approval any time they want to for any reason. It's all about control.”

“I don't get you,” I said. “Why would they withdraw approval if I did set up a shop?”

“Any number of reasons,” he said. “You might be saying anti-Chinese things to your customers, or, I don't know. Didn't you say John has the hots for you?”

“Yeah,” I said, giving a small shudder.

“Well, what if he threatened to have approval withdrawn if you didn't sleep with him?” said Bram.

“You what?” I said, shocked. “Surely he couldn't do that?”

“Probably not,” said Bram. “He's only the Chairman of a Village so he doesn't have much power but he knows people. His network of influence will be far wider than yours. He'll have the ear of Wu if nothing else and Wu will have the Party behind him.”

“Jesus,” I said, horrified.

“Abuse of power is nothing new,” said Bram, “but the scale is. Aus has had corrupt cops and politicians before but their power has been limited and sooner or later they’ve been caught and stopped, but now it’s different. The Chinese are getting ever closer to absolute power and when they have absolute power abuse can be absolute as well as it will be sanctioned by the State.”

“But they don’t have anything like absolute power,” I said. “What about all the Aussies in the government and police and so on?”

“They have no power,” said Bram. “The power stays with the Chinese. Look at your Village. John is the Chairman but he’ll have no say in anything. Wu is the real power. He’ll tell John what to do and John will sell it to the rest of you. Look at tonight’s meeting. He went on about the benefits of the change in Social Credits and the surveillance and totally ignored any safeguards against abuse.”

“But what’s wrong with the surveillance?” I asked. “I wasn’t really listening but isn’t it just a few more cameras? Like the speed cameras and CCTV we’ve had for donkey’s years?”

“Didn’t you see everyone’s faces?” he asked.

“Well, yes,” I admitted, “but I didn’t understand why.”

“You have been so out of the loop, said Bram, shaking his head. “Don’t you even hear the rumours?”

“What rumours?” I asked, tacitly admitting I hadn’t heard them.

“OK,” said Bram. “You heard John say that cameras are going up at every intersection, outside every shop and business and any building where more than one family lives?”

“Um, I think so,” I said. “I definitely heard that bit about intersections.”

“And what do you think the cameras will be filming?” he asked.

“I just figured they were to prevent crime,” I said. “Speeding and shoplifting and so on.”

“Jesus, are you really so naïve? ” he said. “Haven't you heard about facial recognition technology?”

“Umm, well I know it exists,” I said, trying not to be naïve.

“All these cameras will be watching everyone,” he said. “Everyone will be identified, not just by their faces because you can always wrap a scarf around your face or use a hat and sunglasses or something. I've heard the Chinese have developed the technology to recognise people by their gait, how they walk and move. What they're doing is installing the system to track and identify everyone all the time so it will be impossible to do anything that isn't approved. In fact, if you don't do something you should be doing they'll see it and, if you're lucky, deduct some social credits. If you're not you'll be arrested and sent to the Fourteen Rivers or some other labour camp or maybe become a non-person. All you'd have to do is crack a stupid joke or lose your temper with some idiot or not do what some Chinese official says and zip, you're history.”

Chapter Seven

“Bram wasn't there,” I said to Paige when I went into the office on Friday. “I knocked on the door and peered in through a window but the place looked empty.”

He and I had agreed that he'd have his Thursday lesson as scheduled but would then leave and I was to continue as though I expected him to still be there.

Paige looked up from the book she was reading on her phone and frowned.

“Do you suppose he just forgot he had a lesson?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “We've a busy schedule so I doubt he would just forget. He's not answering his phone either.”

“And you haven't heard anything from him?” she asked.

“Nope,” I said. “Have you?”

She checked her phone and confirmed that, no, she hadn't received any communications from Bram either.

“So what should we do?” I asked, more to make conversation than anything else.

A fly buzzed its way in from somewhere and started to circle underneath the pendant light in the middle of the office.

“Nothing we can do,” she said. “I'm sure he'll come back sooner or later and we'll just resume his lessons then. It's not as though we've people queuing up for any spare slots we have.”

“What if he doesn't?” I asked. “When do we give him a refund?”

The fly was making ever wider circles and another had appeared. I wondered why they both circled in the same direction.

"If he formally cancels, we'll have to give him a refund I suppose," she said, curling her lip in displeasure.

"Shouldn't we give him a refund after a while anyway?" I said. "Morally we ought to."

"This is a business," she snapped. "Morals don't come into it."

I smiled to myself as I knew she'd react like that. I only mentioned it to be mischievous. I twisted my chair round to look out the window into the street, wondering why, after all these years, I was feeling mischievous. It was a strange feeling. A little disturbing.

"Fancy a coffee?" I asked, trying to focus on normal routines to cover that feeling.

"Got one, thanks," she said, going back to her book.

I wandered into the kitchen at the back and made myself one then wandered back out again.

"So no sign of any new customers?" I asked, sitting down again.

She just looked up at me with a resigned look in her eyes and the faintest of shrugs. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. I desperately wanted to tell her that we'd been selected for the Community Benevolence Program and that we'd have customers coming out of our ears soon enough but I couldn't. She'd want to know how I knew and she'd tell other people and questions would be asked.

"Thing's will pick up," I said, trying to sound as though I was forcing myself to sound cheerful rather than actually being cheerful. Actually being cheerful would be out of character, even though I was, surprisingly, feeling cheerful. That was disturbing as well. It was like putting on someone else's clothes by mistake, it just didn't feel right. "I was reading a horoscope last night. It was full of good things that are building up and will be revealed soon."

"Yeah, right," she said, her eyes narrowing as she studied me. "As if

you read the horoscopes. You seem very cheerful all of a sudden. Are you feeling ill?"

"No, no," I said, "I'm fine. Just making conversation."

"Hmm," she said and went back to her book after giving me a long look.

One of the flies had gone and the other came over to investigate my coffee. I waved it away and it came back again.

"I'll get some fly spray," I warned it.

It moved further away and settled on the edge of the desk, as if waiting for the coffee to cool down and my attention to be elsewhere. I wrinkled my nose at it and decided I couldn't be bothered to get the fly spray. Round one to the fly.

I gazed back out of the window again although there was little to see. Just a stock feed supplies store on the other side of the road and not much traffic. I reflected that there could be parallels here. No matter how much fly spray I used there'd always be more flies and, as Bram had explained, with a population of one and a half billion and rising, China more than slightly outnumbered us twenty five million Aussies. They could easily assign one or two people to stand next to each Aussie twenty four hours a day and not make any significant dent in their population. So, finding staff to monitor those aspects of our behaviour that their AI systems decided should be looked at more closely wouldn't be a problem.

Unconsciously I got out my phone and started to fiddle with it. When I realised I put it on my desk and picked up my coffee instead. Ever since we'd set up our own little secure communications link I'd been fighting the urge to check to see if he'd messaged me or to send a message myself to see how he was. It was stupid, since the link was only to be used in an emergency but, for the first time in a long time, I felt a desire to communicate with another human being. I even wanted to tell Paige about the link and ask what she thought but I knew I couldn't. OK, she wouldn't report me but she might inadvertently mention something about it to someone else.

I thought it was pretty ironic actually. I, Natalia, little Miss I Don't Need Anyone, had set up an account with the Norwegian dating site Moteplassen under the name Siggie Thorvald. Bram had set up his own account as Sven Magnussen. Both were complete with fake, and very boring, profiles and pictures of fairly unattractive people. This was so neither of us got inundated with date requests from randy Scandinavians. If either of us needed to contact the other we'd just send a date request and take it from there. So the Chinese couldn't track my usage of a Norwegian dating site and follow the link to Bram he'd also set up for me a VPN link through the German VPN host SurfShark. Anyone monitoring my usage of Moteplassen would see that Siggie was accessing it from a German IP address, most likely in Berlin, and, as a side benefit, SurfShark allowed me to watch German television if I ever felt a desire to do so. More to the point though, the connection from me in Australia to SurfShark in Germany would be heavily encrypted and its source, me, unidentifiable.

The only trouble was that the use of a VPN in Australia would be suspicious. After all, the only reason for using a VPN, which stands for Virtual Private Network, was so that your communications couldn't be read. There was a high likelihood that the Chinese would spot the use of the VPN and try to track it down because, clearly, under their benevolent dictatorship, only a criminal or terrorist would have something to hide. They wouldn't like it either if I claimed to be just watching German TV since Chinese-Australian TV should be more than enough for my needs.

SurfShark's VPN would strip off any identifying source information in my communications so the direct risk was negligible. My sourceless communications would go from me to the nearest routing node and from there out to the Internet and over to Germany. However, the Chinese would undoubtedly be checking every data packet for its source information and no source information would set off alarms.

The problem was that the Chinese are nothing if not a patient people and they think in the long term rather than the short term. All they had to do when they found an unsourced packet is to monitor which node received the first connection in the chain of nodes and identify all the people who used that node. Then it is simply a matter of identifying and eliminating all the people who did have their source

information in the data packets then identifying people who couldn't be connecting for whatever reason. Once that was done they'd have a smallish number of people they could physically check on. This would be more difficult in a big city like Sydney but a relative doddle in little Juma Creek, especially as computers are incredibly good at making lists and crossing things off that list. They never get bored. This, in turn, meant that I couldn't just use my dating account whenever I felt like it as, over time, the Chinese would work out that it was only me that was doing nothing else at those moments when the VPN was being used for unsourced packets.

This meant I could only talk to my date in Norway in a relative emergency. If we chatted regularly we'd quickly build up a net profile that identified me, and very probably Bram as well. It was something of a conversation inhibitor, to say the least. Bram had suggested that when I did check the site that I do it from different places so that no pattern in the first connection node built up. For certain, connecting from home or the office would identify me fairly soon and that was unfortunate as I had no particular reason to go anywhere else. I was rarely anywhere other than home or the office. It was doubly unfortunate because I felt a small but growing need to communicate with Bram and all this subterfuge just added an extra level of excitement. It's a bit like those kids who hitch a ride on trains by clinging to the back end. The risk is actually a big part of the fun and it had been a long time since I'd had any fun. Even though I wasn't a part of ACT NOW! I knew my own cute Freedom Fighter and that was pretty cool. Pretty romantic, actually, although I squashed that thought whenever it arose.

I was also curious to see if the extremely plain late middle aged Norwegian woman whose picture I had appropriated was getting any attention. As my alter-ego I felt she deserved it.

* * *

I used the dating site three days later.

Regardless of anything else, Bram had made a crack in one of my protective walls. Ever since I had watched Liam being executed my mind had more or less expunged him as the pain of remembering him

was too much for me to cope with. Over time my brain had learned to simply shy away from thinking about Liam and he had become a large empty murky space in my memories. I knew Liam was in that empty space but it was easier to remember around it than remember what was in it. Bram's desire to find out what Liam had been working on had forced my mind to confront that space and remember Liam directly, as a person, as my love, as the centre of my world. Bram had made it possible for me to remember the good times rather than simply blot out the whole of Liam.

Slowly, but in increasing amounts, I had begun to remember little things. Like that time when the air conditioner packed up in that restaurant and he'd sat there fanning me with the menu until someone was dragged out of the back to get it working again. Or the time when he split his shorts trying to jump over a puddle and marched into a shop with his bum hanging out to get another pair. Or the time soon after we'd met when I'd come out of my apartment to go to work and found the doorstep covered in flowers. Or the times when I'd open a drawer or a cupboard to get something and find a little note telling me he loved me. Things like that. And the more I remembered these things the more I was able to remember them and appreciate and cherish them rather than suppress them to avoid the pain.

It was Sunday night. I was in that twilight world moments away from sleep when I remembered that Liam had mentioned someone called Ming. He'd been working on background for his article and had to go out to meet this Ming. He wouldn't say who Ming was nor why he had to meet Ming but, in those moments before sleep, I remembered him going out and my frustration and sadness at not being able to be wholly involved in his world. Intellectually, of course, I knew that there were aspects of his work I could never know about. His sources, his connections, whatever little quid-pro-quo deals he had to make to get a scoop. Intellectually I knew and accepted this, but emotionally that was the one little fly in the contented ointment of my life.

When Ming's name drifted into my mind I woke up with a start. Not long after the Surrender, or the Emancipation or whatever you wanted to call it, Liam had started to work on investigating something that led to his death and somehow, I had no idea how, this Ming was involved. The Chinese had taken everything that Liam had that could have

anything to do with his investigations but maybe, just maybe, if Bram could find this Ming he might be able to find out something about what Liam had been working on. It wouldn't bring Liam back but maybe it would in some way give some sort of validity to his death. Give some sort of meaning to an otherwise random and pointless death from a bullet from an anonymous Chinese executioner. There was no way I could ever find this Ming but there was a tiny possibility that Bram could. He had said that his group collected information so they must have ways of doing that.

I'd leapt out of bed and rushed to get my phone to go online to send him a message through the Norwegian site then shut the phone down in a panic. How many people in Juma Creek would be using the internet around midnight? It was primarily a farming community so most likely most people in the area would be asleep as farmers tend to get up early. It wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that I might be the only person accessing the net. If so, it would be easy to identify who was sending the sourceless packets across a VPN.

I'd put my phone down on the arm of the couch and stared at it for a while as though it was a brown snake coiled and ready to bite me then abruptly got up and gone back to bed. It took me a while to go back to sleep. What had seemed an exciting romantic little fantasy had suddenly become real and I could almost imagine tanks and armed soldiers surrounding my little duplex before breaking down the door and dragging me off to god knows where to pull my fingernails out with pliers.

I'd worried about it off and on through most of Monday. I kept telling myself that the name Ming would mean nothing to anyone. After all, how many Mings are there in China? And even if it did, that Ming would know nothing but my mind kept coming back to Liam and the faint possibility that there might be some worth to his death. Didn't I at least owe him that? A chance of an epithet instead of ignominy?

In the end I hit on a solution. Around the time the mums picked up their kids from school and then went shopping I went down to Juma Creek's one and only shopping centre. It wasn't particularly big but it was the most crowded place in the area so my link to Norway would be just one anonymous little signal amongst a multitude of others. I'd

found a bench near the town's only supermarket and made the connection from there, hoping that the communications from the checkout-free trolleys to wherever they were controlled from would add to the mass of internet traffic. I logged in as Siggie Thorvald then searched for Sven Magnussen. It turned out there were three of them registered with the site. One was quite cute, in an abstract way, and another had an interesting profile but the third was a boring old fart who didn't look too appealing so I asked him for a date. I also mentioned that we might have a mutual friend called Ming who was in transition. What transition was I had no idea but in that drifting state when Ming had popped into my mind the word had come with the name in some sort of free form association. With a bit of luck anyone tracking me might simply assume that Ming was someone going through a mid-life crisis or a sex change or something. Anyway, I'd hesitated, my finger on the Send icon then, realising that the damage had been done when I'd opened the VPN connection, I'd sent the message. When Bram would get it I had no idea and the odds were that he wouldn't have a clue what I was talking about but, and this I felt was significant although I couldn't have explained why, I had done something. For the first time since Liam I had actually done something positive.

Afterwards I'd stayed on the bench, watching the shoppers, wondering how many of them approved of the changes that the Chinese were bringing in and who would report me if they knew what I had done. It was impossible to tell. They looked like ordinary people to me, except for the handful of Chinese who were shopping as well. They looked ominous and scary. After a while I'd slunk out of the shopping centre, trying to look inconspicuous. It wasn't until I got home that I realised that trying to look inconspicuous would only look suspicious. It would probably have been better to have done a bit of shopping myself then walk back to the car looking tired.

* * *

"Have you seen those new security cameras?" asked Paige the next day.

She'd got in a little later than I had because she'd gone to pick up a package for her husband from the post office.

“Yeah, there's one at the corner of the street,” I said, “and they'll probably install one outside here. Maybe one inside as well since people going to the dentist might be feeling a little anti-social.”

“No, I didn't mean them,” she said. “I mean those mobile ones on wheels.”

“What mobile ones?” I asked, looking up. I'd been reading about some minor changes to the road rules that were going to come into effect later in the year.

“There was one outside the post office,” she said. “It's a little blue box on wheels that trundles around and it has a camera on a pole.”

“Why's it on wheels?” I asked.

“I was talking to Cathy in the post office about it,” said Paige. “Apparently it's a new type of camera that's hooked into a system that predicts behaviour from body language and facial expressions. It's on wheels so that when it sees someone it thinks is preparing to do something anti-social it can follow them while sending a live stream back to the authorities. Isn't that clever.”

“I suppose,” I said and thought about it for a while. “Surely though if someone is about to do something couldn't they just knock it over?”

“Cathy says they can't be knocked over,” she said. “They're specially designed to be self righting and, of course, they'll be recording who knocked them over as well.”

“OK, that is clever,” I admitted. “Maybe they'll do that with cars as well. Umm, so why couldn't I just put a bag or a hood over its lens or pick it up and steal it?”

“Cathy said they're too heavy to be picked up by just one person,” said Paige, “and if two people do it at least one of them will always be recorded. I don't know about putting a bag over them though. Maybe they use infra-red or something.”

“Well, that is interesting,” I said. “Are there many of them around?”

"I only saw the one," she said. "Maybe it's just a prototype or trial or something. It's a good idea though. Especially for a woman walking alone after dark. I'd feel a lot safer if one of those cameras was keeping an eye on me."

"You don't feel it's invasive?" I asked. "Like someone is watching you all the time?"

"God no," she said, fishing her phone out of her bag. "We're women. We're always being watched, usually by creeps. At least these are watching out for our safety."

"I guess," I said and thought about it for a few moments. "You don't suppose any creeps will be watching us through the cameras, though?"

"Ohh, now that's a nasty thought," she said, looking up from her phone. "Nah, I wouldn't think so. Aren't they watched by computers? No human will see them unless the computer flags a problem."

"So they tell us," I said. "Can we believe them though?"

She shrugged. "Not as though we've got a choice," she said, looking back at her phone. "For sure I'd rather be followed around by a security camera than some random druggie with evil thoughts."

"Well, there is that," I said.

"Hold on," said Paige, fumbling for her chair then sitting down without taking her eyes off her phone. "I've got some weird message here."

"What sort of message?" I said.

"Something about a Community Benevolence Program," she said. "I don't understand it."

"Can I see?" I asked, getting up and walking the short distance to her desk.

"Sure," she said, handing the phone over. "I think it might be some

sort of scam. I didn't think they were allowed any more.”

The screen went blank for a moment until the phone recognised my fingerprints then the message flashed up. I read it through, having the advantage of prior knowledge.

“I think it's genuine,” I said. “Look, it says here that the District is funding this Community Benevolence Program and we've been selected to participate. I'm pretty sure it isn't a scam. It's got the right authentication.”

She snatched the phone back. “Are you sure?” she asked, probably rhetorically since she didn't wait for me to reply. “I wonder what 'participate' means? Will we have to go somewhere and give speeches or something?”

“I think I've heard about this,” I said carefully, perching my hip on the side of her desk. “I think this Benevolence thingy means the District will be putting some business our way. They'll probably send us some people for training.”

“Oh, god, I wish,” she said. “We haven't had any new students since your Bram did a runner.”

“We don't know he did a runner,” I said mildly. “And it's not like he owes us any money.”

“I suppose not,” said Paige, carefully putting down her phone in case she accidentally deleted the message. “If it's District I suppose they'll be Party members. I wonder how many?”

“No idea,” I said. “I guess we'll just have to wait and see.”

She leaned back in her chair and looked thoughtfully out the window.

“You don't suppose that's them,” she said with a laugh.

I twisted to look as three Chinese men got out of a car that had just pulled up outside.

"I doubt it," I said. "They've only just send the message."

"Yeah, you're right," she said. "Only I think they're coming in."

"What, in here?" I said, listening to the footsteps in the corridor.

"Yes," said Paige as the door opened and the three men came in.

I noticed they wore the same type of military suits as Wu, except that these were grey not blue and had insignia and holsters.

"Na'alia Had'owa?" said the lead man, looking at Paige.

"That's me," I said as Paige started to say no.

"You unner awest," he said. "Come witha us. Now!"

Chapter Eight

After a lengthy drive in the back of an army truck accompanied by two unsmiling guards who stared at me constantly, I was dragged unceremoniously out of the truck then roughly pushed into what looked like a dormitory. Seven pairs of eyes glanced over to see what the commotion was then went back to staring at the ceiling or the wall or whatever they'd been staring at. The eighth pair of eyes stayed watching me.

"You staya," said one of my guards, jabbing his finger at the floor. "Unnerstan'?"

"Understand," I said, subserviently.

I understood the point about staying but had no idea where this place was or why I was there. Frankly, though, I didn't really care. I was just glad to be gone from where I had been and very apprehensive about what was to come. This place was obviously just on the way as these were the first non-Chinese I'd seen for a long time.

The guard rattled his rifle at me and scowled to emphasise his point then backed through the door and kicked it shut. I heard the whine of the powerful truck motor pick up then fade as it drove away. Cautiously I looked behind me. There were no guards. That was a novelty.

I didn't move though, just turned back to face the room. It was a solidly built wooden building with a dirty wooden floor and filthy glass windows. The late afternoon sunlight wormed its way in through all the windows on one side, making the floor splotchy with light and dark patches. Down each side of the room were fifteen or so thin mattresses lying on the floor, somewhat haphazardly. There was no other furniture although there was a door at the far end. A row of lights hanging from the ceiling ran the length of the room. They were on although they added little to the scene. Seven of the mattresses had people lying on them. The eighth person, a woman of indeterminate age, was leaning on the handle of a mop, watching me. She wore the same type of dirty yellow coarsely woven jumpsuit as I did.

I let my eyes rove around the room then return to the woman. She was still watching me.

“What's your name, sweetie?” she asked, pushing some lank hair out of her face.

“Nat,” I said.

“I'm Marcie,” she said. “You need a doctor?”

“No,” I said, wondering why she'd asked.

“Just as well,” she said. “No doc here 'til Wednesday.”

“What day is it?” I asked.

“Monday,” said Marcie. “Um, 20th September.”

“September?” I repeated, tonelessly. Then it sank in. “Wow.”

“When were you arrested?” she asked.

“July,” I said. “I'm not sure when exactly but it was a little over a week before the Olympics started in Brisbane.”

“Wow,” said Marcie, her eyes opening wide in surprise. “They finished a couple of months ago. I watched some of them on TV. You must have been a pretty big fish to have been there that long. You sure they didn't torture you?”

“No,” I said quietly, “they didn't torture me.”

They hadn't needed to. I was a soft Westerner, used to the comforts and civilities of life. All they had to do was humiliate and degrade me and I told them what little I knew. I didn't tell them everything, though, I only answered their questions. They never asked me about my one and only use of the VPN so I never told them about Siggie and Sven or the message I'd sent about Ming. If they had I would have told them. Every day I was taken before a panel of three men who shouted the same questions at me over and over again. Who is Bram

Tanner? What other names does he have? Who else was in ACT NOW!? How were they organised? That sort of thing. Questions I couldn't begin to answer, even though I wanted to.

It was the little things that wore me down, and depressingly quickly. Like no utensils so I had to eat my rice and beans with my dirty fingers. Like no toilet facilities in my little cell so I had to go on the floor, watched by a camera, and live with the consequences until the cell was hosed out, which wasn't that often. It didn't help that my diet of rice and beans gave me diarrhoea. There were also no washing facilities in my cell. Every few days I'd be taken to an area where there was a small container of cold water fixed to the floor. I had to strip off my dirty jumpsuit and wash all over using just a small piece of rough cloth and a sliver of soap. Six male guards watched me every time. They lounged in a circle around me and stared while I stripped off then, while I was washing, one or other would poke me or trip me or snatch my cloth away and toss it around and they'd laugh and jeer and jabber away to each other in Chinese. I'm guessing what they said wasn't particularly complimentary. And no matter which way I faced, when I knelt, bent or squatted to get at the water at least one of them would see my bits and that would make him jabber and snigger even more. Afterwards I had to put the dirty jumpsuit back on which was pretty disgusting and made my body washing rather pointless. Perhaps the worst thing, though, was the lack of sanitary towels so after my first period there started I had to face my panel of three male interrogators with its stains livid on the pale yellow cloth of the jumpsuit.

It was the sheer helplessness that got to me. I was less than nothing and their lack of interest in me, even as a woman, was crushing. I was just a dirty object of derision, wallowing in my own filth. I couldn't even buy any respect with useful information. In the end they gave up and tossed me into a truck like some messy piece of garbage. I wasn't even worth a bullet in the back of my head.

"So where am I?" I asked, still not moving.

"The Air Force Base in Penrith," said Marcie.

"Penrith?" I said, taken aback. "What am I doing in Penrith?"

“Heading for the Fourteen Rivers Project,” said Marcie. “Like the rest of us. You come in from Sydney?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I was arrested in Juma Creek, down near the Victorian border, but I've no idea where I've been since. How do you know I'm being sent to the Project?”

I wondered if she was some sort of trustee or even an official.

“Most likely Sydney,” she said. “We're all from Sydney. We're all going to the Rivers, too. This is just a holding area 'til they send a truck to take us.”

“When will that be?” I asked.

“When this place is full,” she said. “I've been here three days. Itch's been here the longest, ain't ya, Itch.”

I gasped and backed away as one of the people on a mattress rolled over and revealed herself to be Chinese.

“Yes, nine days,” she said.

“Don't worry,” said Marcie, seeing my reaction. “She ain't Chinese. She's a Jappo.”

“Japanese?” I asked, unable to go any further because of the door.

“Yup,” said Marcie. She dropped the mop on the floor. “C'mon, you look like you need a decent scrub-up. Washroom's over here.”

I followed Marcie to the door at the far end of the room, giving Itch a wide berth. It was indeed a washroom, with five proper toilets in cubicles with doors and a large tiled area with four or five cubicles with shower heads attached to the wall.

“Oh, god,” I said, my knees going weak. “Showers!”

“Only cold water, mind,” said Marcie, “but there's some of that liquid soap stuff which works OK for shampoo. Ain't no conditioner

though.”

“That’s OK,” I said. “Umm, do you mind ...?”

“Go right ahead, sweetie,” she said. “I’ll get you a towel.”

I jumped into a cubicle and, to my intense joy, discovered there was a latch on the door. No lock but a latched door was way better than being watched. I stripped off my jumpsuit and left it in a heap on the floor then turned on both taps, just in case Marcie had been joking about the lack of hot water. She hadn’t been but the water that came out of the shower head had a decent amount of pressure and the liquid soap worked well enough. Presumably this was still a working air force base so the basic amenities were functional although they’d probably turned off the power to the hot water tank since prisoners wouldn’t be worth the cost of heating it.

I stayed under the water, soaping and re-soaping myself until long after the dirty water had become clear again. It was glorious, delightful, superb, wonderful; there wasn’t an adequate superlative to describe it. After a while I started to feel chilled and reluctantly turned off the water.

Almost instantly there was a tap on the door then it opened. Marcie stuck her head in and gestured for me to turn the tap back on. Puzzled, I did and stood back under the stream but she beckoned me forward, out of the water, and handed me a towel. It wasn’t a huge luxurious, soft, fluffy towel. It was rough and stained in a couple of places but it was still a towel, and big enough to go around me.

“Leave the water running,” whispered Marcie. “There’re microphones in here and cameras out there. So what you really in here for?”

“They think I’m associated with ACT NOW!” I whispered, wrapping the towel protectively around myself even though I was still wet. “You know, the Canberra resistance group.”

“No shit!” she whispered, her eyes widening again. “Yeah, I’ve heard of them. Kill the shower, you’ve been in long enough. Don’t want the bastards getting suspicious.”

She pushed the shower door fully open and I stooped to pick up my jumpsuit.

“Got you a clean one,” she said, looking distastefully at my filthy old one. “You dry up and put it on then come back out and meet the others.”

She pointed to a clean jumpsuit hanging from a coat-hanger above a bench then turned and walked back into the room with the mattresses. She came back with her mop while I was still towelling myself dry and picked up my old jumpsuit using the handle.

“This is going straight in the garbage,” she said. “Ought to burn it but we haven't anything to burn it with. Back in a mo’.”

When I'd put on the clean jumpsuit she re-appeared and sniffed me appreciatively.

“Much better,” she said.

“I don't suppose there are any hair brushes here?” I asked.

“Where's your stuff?” she asked. “Didn't see you bring anything in with you.”

“I don't have anything,” I said. “Except that jumpsuit you took away.”

“Shit,” she said, grimacing. “Not even any money?”

“No,” I said. “When I was arrested I was taken ... wherever ... and everything I had on me was taken away. I don't even have my phone or ID card.”

“Bastards,” she said under her breath so the microphones didn't pick it up. “You got any nits or lice?”

“I don't think so,” I said, automatically putting my hand to my hair. “My head doesn't itch.”

“Let's have a look,” she said so I bent my head forward while she

inspected my still wet hair.

"Looks clean enough," she said. "OK, you can use mine. C'mon. Oh, leave the towel on the hook. It's the only one we've got."

I followed her out of the washroom, my mind filled with the prospect of being able to brush my hair for the first time in what felt like forever.

"There you go," she said, pulling a cheap plastic brush out of a canvas holdall. It was one of those ones with small metal spikes with little lumps of plastic on the ends. "And take it easy. Your hair's a tangled mess and I don't want the splines ripped out. God knows when I'll be able to get another."

"I'll be careful," I said, handling the brush like the Crown Jewels. "Is there a mirror anywhere?"

"At the end of the showers," she said. "Just the one. I think this used to be a men's barrack room."

"Thanks," I said, heading off to find the mirror, the first I'd seen since leaving home before my arrest.

I wished I hadn't. My hair was, as Marcie had said, a mess, but my face was also drawn and looking haggard. There were dark circles under my eyes, most likely as I hadn't been sleeping well as the light in my cell was never turned off and a hidden speaker played the speeches of Li Hong twenty four seven. I had a number of zits on my face, too; several with ugly yellow heads. Standing looking at myself, I could see I'd also lost some weight and had developed a bit of a cringe in my posture.

"Over two months," I muttered, staring in disgust at myself.

I made myself stand up straight and attended to the zits before starting to work on my hair. It took a while as my hair was knotted and in the process I discovered a few grey hairs. On the positive side it was getting nicely long and if I could get hold of some conditioner, a styling wand and some touch-up dye my hair would look pretty

good.

“Fat bloody chance of that,” I thought, pulling the grey hairs from side to side to see if they went away. “Sounds like you’re off to the Project.”

The Fourteen Rivers Project had been announced two days after the Surrender during Li Hong's first speech. It was the main feature of a package to make Australia a wonderful place and provide lots of jobs and boost the economy. The basic idea was that the fourteen biggest rivers in Northern Queensland and the Northern Territory were going to be dammed and all the flood water during the Wet season captured. Four big canals and a network of channels would then carry all the water that would normally just flood out to the sea down to the central deserts and arid areas of the south of Australia. The idea was to make those areas habitable and productive so that a hundred and fifty million Chinese could move in and bolster the Australian economy for the betterment of us all.

It wasn't a new idea. Variations had been proposed many times over the years since Australia was discovered to have deserts and a northern Wet season but the experts had never found a way to make it cost effective. Very likely this was because they didn't have the enticement of offloading a hundred and fifty million people from the Chinese mainland. After all, Australia has 80% of the land area of China but less than 2% of the population. A bit of hard work, a lot of water and no doubt a few gazillion tons of fertiliser would make this possible, as would the removal of the fundamental problem that afflicted all large scale Australian projects. Australian politicians only thought in the short to medium term because they continually needed to be re-elected. Chinese politicians, on the other hand, are there for life and can think long term. If it took a hundred years to convert the desert to pasture then it took a hundred years.

A documentary I watched soon after Li Hong's announcement, and I only watched it because Liam wanted to watch it, was about Great Chinese Civil Engineering Projects. It turned out to be mildly interesting although the constant self praising tone got a bit irritating after a while. More to the point though, the Chinese had already undertaken a similar project in China. It was called the The South-North Water Transfer Project and vast amounts of water were

channelled from the Yangtze River in the south to the dry industrial areas in the north and had been completed in around fifty years. There were quite a few other big projects showcased in the documentary, including a 55km long bridge that connected Zhuhai, Hong Kong and Macau and a little segment on how they built a hospital for a thousand beds in only ten days during the COVID crisis back in the early 2020s. I'd been pretty impressed as a teenager in Canberra when a McDonald's was built near where I lived with my parents in just over five weeks so a big hospital in ten days was an achievement I could comprehend, unlike the South-North Water Transfer Project which was too big for my mind to grasp.

Li Hong had boasted in his speech that tens of thousands of jobs would be created in the Fourteen Rivers Project and the economy would further benefit from the savings in the prison system by sending all prisoners with a sentence of three months or more to work as volunteer labourers on the project. The spare capacity thus made available in the prisons would be used to house the homeless, drug addicts and similar unfortunates until they were socially useful again.

As I was now apparently a volunteer labourer on the Project presumably I was now a criminal with a sentence of at least three months although no one had actually bothered to give me a trial or tell me what my sentence was. I stopped playing with my hair and sagged against the wall, my forehead pressed against the mirror. I was suddenly close to tears. I'd heard rumours of what it was like as a volunteer on the Project and waves of despair washed over me. Slowly I sank down onto the floor and curled up in a foetal position.

“Oh sweet Jesus,” I mumbled. “What the hell is going on? How did all this shit happen?”

I don't know how long I stayed like that but suddenly the washroom door slammed open and a guard rushed in. He saw me on the floor and started screaming then grabbed the neck of my jumpsuit and some of my hair and tried to drag me to my feet. Under his impetus I got up and he pushed me through the door, hard. I fell forward and stumbled and landed on top of Marcie and her mop.

“Oh fuck you,” I screamed angrily, my nerves stretched so far beyond

breaking point that I couldn't take it anymore.

I'd had two months of degrading humiliation and forced subservience at the hands of a whole bunch of these bastards and this one was just one too many. My mind snapped and I leapt to my feet, grabbing the hard something that was under my hand in the process. According to Marcie afterwards, it seems I hit the guard over the head with her mop handle then continued hitting him when he fell to the floor. I don't remember any of that. All I remember is sinking to the floor, feeling exhausted, and seeing a pool of blood and the grey uniformed body of the guard with not much head left. I also remember dry retching a few times then someone, Marcie probably, pulling me up and back.

"Now you've bleeding done it," she moaned, pushing me away from the body. "We're all going to die."

"We're already dead," I shouted and threw what was left of the bloodied mop handle at her. "Can't you see that?"

I was jostled as the others who'd been lying on their mattresses gathered around, shocked by the sudden and extreme violence.

"You beauty!" said one of the men suddenly. He flung his arms around me and gave me a bone crushing hug. "You little beauty! Way to go!"

He let me loose and I half fell, struggling to breathe. One of the other guys and the Japanese girl caught me and pulled me upright.

"You OK?" she asked.

"Yes," I wheezed, unable to remember her name.

"Cool," she said. "Listen, I don't know what your plan is, but you need to get on with it pretty damned quickly. More guards will be here in a minute. It's almost time for our self-criticism session."

My plan? I stood there blinking at her wondering why she thought I had a plan. I hadn't planned anything since Liam died.

“Tell us what to do,” said another girl urgently, running over to look out of one of the windows.

“Umm,” I said, trying somewhat unsuccessfully to fight down the rising panic in my chest.

“Come on!” growled an older man, thumping my shoulder. “We’re with you, just tell us what you want us to do.”

“Umm,” I said again, looking around wildly. The only thing I could think of was to run away and hide.

“Nat!” shouted the girl at the window. “They’re coming!”

“Oh god,” I said desperately. “Everybody run!” and proceeded to show them what I meant, nearly crashing into the washroom door as my foot slipped in the congealing blood on the floor.

Chapter Nine

Clutching my shoulder I stumbled into the washroom and looked around desperately for another door. There wasn't one, but I spotted a window so I ran over. I could hear the feet of some of the others slapping on the tiles behind me. The window was one of those old fashioned ones with frosted glass and wires embedded inside. It also had a metal frame and a lever that held it shut. After tugging on the lever several times I realised it had been welded.

"Oh shit," I said and started to check the cubicles to see if there was any other way out.

A crash behind me made me spin around. A man, older but beefy looking, had wrapped the towel around his arm and punched the window. It was cracked and fragmented but still held together by the wire. I ran back and he pushed me out of the way then methodically punched the glass several times around the frame so it sagged then came away and fell outside. To my surprise it was getting dark.

"Piece of cake," he said and cautiously poked his head through. "Looks clear. Who's first?"

The girl who'd been watching through the window in the mattress room came running in. She looked around, spotted me and ran over.

"An officer's coming over from the big building," she announced. "Two of the guards from next door have gone to talk to him. I've jammed what's left of the mop under the door handle. That might delay them a few moments."

"That was good thinking," I said, impressed despite the chaos building in the washroom as everyone crowded in.

"I once had an abusive boyfriend," she said, dismissively. "We going out here?"

"Yes," I said, since no other option occurred to me. "You first."

"K," she said and the beefy man half pushed her through the window.

“You next,” he said and grabbed me.

I was taken by surprise and didn't start trying to kick him until I was half through the window. The other girl was peering around the corner of the building and, after I picked myself up off the gravel and rubbed my shoulder again, I joined her. The gravel hurt my bare feet.

“They've stopped to talk,” she whispered, edging back to let me see.

I peered round and, although it was getting dark, I could see a large building some distance away. It looked to have three floors. Between me and it there was a bitumen road that ran parallel to my building with a grassed area with a few trees the other side and a car park. There were maybe four or five cars in the car park, all close to the building. More to the point, off to the right, was another small building, much like mine, with lights on and music playing. Not loudly but enough to have covered what noise we'd made so far. On the grassed area across the road from the other building were five soldiers. One looked to be lecturing the others so I guessed he was an officer. The road curved around the side of that building and I couldn't see what lay beyond. I turned to see what lay the other side and five people were crouched down, staring at me. They made me jump as I hadn't heard a thing.

“Excuse me,” I said, picking my way through them.

I went to the other corner and looked out. This was much more interesting. Around the building itself was a gravel path and a grassed area past that. Beyond the grass was a huge car park, empty but for three military cars. I don't know the technical terms but they looked more like ordinary cars than armoured personnel carriers or tanks. Beyond the car park, perhaps a hundred or a hundred and fifty metres distant was a road. I could see light traffic on it and, judging by their headlights, they were doing a fair speed so it must be a major road.

“What kind of military base is this?” I whispered, pulling my head back. “It looks to be almost deserted. I thought bases were full of people and vehicles and all lit up. I can't even see a runway, let alone any aircraft.”

"It's for children," said the Japanese girl. "They come here at the weekends. All last week it was deserted, as it is now, but this weekend and last weekend it was very busy."

"Must be air force cadets," said a man I hadn't seen before. He seemed to have far too many teeth and they gleamed whitely in the increasing gloom.

"Here, Nat," whispered Marcie, coming up beside me. "We're all out, 'cept Wayne. He's stuck."

"Who's Wayne?" I whispered, looking back towards the window. Sure enough, a large torso was hanging out the window and struggling.

"The big guy," she whispered. "What do I do?"

"How the hell should I know?" I wanted to shout but didn't. The soldiers round the corner would have heard me. I rubbed my shoulder again and flexed it. It still hurt. "Ohh," I muttered irritably, "get two or three of the others and drag him through. Don't let him scream."

"OK," she whispered and backed away.

I went back and peered around the first corner to see the one lecturing lighting up a cigarette. The flare of his lighter momentarily bright. He barked a command then turned and started stalking back to the big building. The other four turned to go back to the music building.

"Oh shit," I muttered.

I turned around just as there was a stifled yelp and the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. I guessed Wayne was now unstuck.

"They're about to find we're not there," I whispered, looking at the blur of faces massed behind me. "The guards will probably raise the alarm and all hell will break loose. When it does, run that way," and I pointed across the car park. "There's a road there and probably a fence. If you get that far, spread out and try to find a gap. Can anyone

run fast?"

They looked at each other but no one volunteered. Then the Japanese girl spoke. She sounded breathless.

"I used to do gymnastics," she said. "No doubt I am still fast on my feet."

"Great," I said. "Would you be a diversion for the rest of us?"

She frowned.

"What do you wish me to do?" she asked, breathlessly. I later discovered she always sounded breathless. It was part of her accent.

"When they raise the alarm, run as fast as you can up that way," I said, pointing up the road that ran beside the building. "Make sure they see you and give chase. There's another building like this one further up and then some trees. When you reach the trees, cut back across and join the rest of us at the fence down there."

Her oval eyes squinted as she tried to see the trees and estimate the distances.

"OK," she said.

Wayne came up close beside us. I could see his jumpsuit was ripped all down his front and he seemed to have some blood at the top of his belly.

"Don't run straight," he whispered. "If you zig-zag a bit it'll be more difficult to shoot you."

"Zig-zag, right," said the Japanese girl. She looked a little apprehensive. I wished I could remember her name.

"Everybody," I whispered loudly, "get over that side of the building and get ready to run to the fence. Remember, when you get there, spread out and look for gaps or holes."

Wayne turned and put his hand on the shoulder of another man, the one who'd called me a little beauty, and started whispering to him. He nodded and they both started moving off along the side of the building.

I was about to ask where they were going but decided not to bother. After all, they weren't my responsibility and if they had other plans that was fine by me.

"Nat, you come too," whispered Wayne, looking back and waving at me.

I looked around but as yet nothing was happening and it was quite dark now. The lights from the windows were spilling out from both buildings but not travelling that far.

"OK, the rest of you, start heading off towards the fence," I whispered. "Keep slow and low until they raise the alarm then run like hell. You, what's your name?"

"Ichika," she whispered.

"Oh, yeah," I thought. "Itch. Makes sense."

"You stay here until the alarm then get into the light and attract attention. Don't forget to zig-zag."

"Yes, Nat," she said and started to back away.

"Good luck," I said then turned back to the others. "Go on, move. Stay low and stay away from the lights."

They looked at each other then Marcie started to move off and the others followed. Except Wayne and the beauty man. They had reached the far end of the building and Wayne was still looking expectantly at me. I sighed and went down to join them, ducking to stay below the windows.

"What's going on?" I asked quietly when I reached him.

“We’re not built for speed,” he said. “I figured when they raise the alarm and set off after Itch, some might come through this way and spot the others. Me and Mattie can grab ’em.”

“Good thinking,” I said. “Where is Mattie?” I figured he was the beauty guy.

“On the corner of the guard building,” said Wayne. “Shhh,” and he pressed himself against the side of the building.

Over the sound of the quiet music I could just hear the crunch of boots on gravel then there was a faint thud and a Chinese curse. I guessed whoever had come to the door had expected it to open and walked into it when it didn’t. Then there was a rattling as, or so I imagined, he tried to open the door a couple of times. Then he kicked it and shouted. Then everything went quiet. I had a vision of the soldier wondering what to do about a jammed door. Then there were a few foot crunches and an almighty crash. It seemed he’d decided to charge at the door. I kind of hoped he’d hurt himself and rubbed my shoulder as it still felt sore.

It was maybe 7 seconds before the predicted hell broke loose. A piercing whistle blasted loudly from inside the building, over and over again then got a little louder as the soldier came running out. The music suddenly cut off from the guard’s building then soldiers began to stream out, several brandishing rifles and one or two still struggling to put their tunics on. The first soldier ran over to one of the others, probably a junior officer, and started jabbering away and pointing and they both ran into our building. A few moments later they both ran out and the officer started shouting orders and waving his hands about.

Then floodlights started to come on, lighting up the car park in front of the big building. A shadow jumped in front of me and I looked behind to see that floodlights had lit up the big car park behind as well. Five figures were clearly visible, one almost at the fence, three others further back and one barely half way. They looked very exposed.

Then there was a muffled crack and I peeked around the edge of the

building, ducking under Wayne's shoulder to see. One of the soldiers was pointing off to the left and another was taking aim. Three or four others started to run in that direction and the officer was getting excited, jabbing his finger repeatedly off to the left and calling for reinforcements.

Itch must have been doing her stuff and I prayed that she was zig-zagging. There were some more cracking sounds then they stopped. Most likely because of the soldiers running after her and getting in the way of the shooters. I glanced over at Mattie and saw he was peering round the corner of the other building. He glanced over and raised a thumb at me so I raised a thumb at him. I have no idea why, it just seemed like a good idea. Then he suddenly jerked back out of sight and I looked back at the soldiers. The officer must have had his wits about him as he'd sent two down between the buildings towards us.

"Oh shit," I muttered, jerking back as well then I was roughly shoved aside and fell, hurting my injured shoulder yet again.

I rolled over, clutching my shoulder, and a heavy body landed on top of my legs, trapping me face down. There were a couple of fleshy thumps and the body jerked then went limp. I twisted as far as I could and managed to bring one knee up and tried to push the body off me. There was a pounding in my ears and I kept kicking but the body wouldn't move.

"You OK, Nat?" whispered Wayne.

I could see him looking over towards Mattie then he looked down at me.

"My leg," I whispered, "I can't move it."

Wayne looked down at my legs then dragged the soldier off me before helping me to my feet. I leaned against the side of the building for a few moments, the adrenaline making my arms and legs tremble then I looked down at the soldier. I figured he must have been a sumo wrestler or something judging by the weight but to my surprise the soldier was a girl, no bigger than me and looking a few years younger but weighted down with equipment. She moaned and tossed her head

from side to side and Wayne punched her hard on the side of her head. She stopped moaning and lay still.

I was about to protest – hell, I was definitely not a supporter of violence against women – then checked myself. She wasn't a woman, she was an enemy soldier and would undoubtedly have shot me if she'd had the opportunity.

“Nice one,” I said instead and looked back between the buildings.

No one was there. It looked as though these two had been sent down this way and the others had gone off in hot pursuit of Itch. Then I realised that two had come this way and jerked round. To my relief, Mattie had been as effective as Wayne and there was another soldier lying on the ground behind the other building.

I looked out across the car park and there was no sign of anyone, prisoners or soldiers. Hoping that was a good sign I pointed firmly at Mattie then over towards the fence the way I'd seen people do it in movies. He must have seen the same movies as he nodded and started to jog in the right direction. I noticed he was carrying his soldier's rifle.

“You OK, Nat?” hissed Wayne again.

It seemed like an hour had passed between his two queries but it must have been barely a couple of seconds. Time flies when you're having fun and I definitely wasn't having fun. Ergo, time must be moving very slowly.

“Yes,” I hissed back, “let's get out of here.”

He took the girl's rifle and grabbed my upper arm. I nearly screamed as this was my injured shoulder but I staggered after him, limping as my trapped leg was now full of pins and needles.

When we got past the grassed area and onto the bitumen of the car park I struggled and managed to get my arm away from him. He stopped jogging and I pushed him.

“Keep going,” I cried. “Don't stop.”

Mattie was maybe twenty paces further ahead and looking like he'd played rugby at one time although not with any great speed. Wayne paused and looked at me then at Mattie then back at me.

“Go, go!” I cried and waved.

He hesitated then set off again. He was right, he wasn't built for speed.

I looked back and to the right to where the trees were past the buildings. The floodlights didn't go that far. They only covered the car park. Still, I could see stabs of light as torches searched among the trees and I heard a faint crack as someone shot something. I hoped it was a rabbit and not Itch. I twisted further round and scanned the darker patch that was the trees against the lighter dark of the night but I could see no sign of her so I set off as fast as I could after Wayne. I caught up with him fairly quickly and grabbed the tatters of his jumpsuit, urging him forward. He was already breathing heavily. Up ahead, Mattie was almost at the fence.

“Nearly there,” I said urgently to Wayne, “come on, come on!”

He gave me a weak grin but redoubled his efforts and I grabbed the rifle to make it easier for him. It was surprisingly light but I took no notice. We desperately needed to get out of the floodlights.

We were maybe ten metres from the edge of the lit area when a sudden movement to my right caught my eye. I twisted my head to look and saw a tiny dark shape had emerged from the black smudge of trees and was moving fast.

“Go, go!” I shouted at Wayne and pushed him onwards as I stopped and dropped onto one knee.

There was a sudden flaring of light as a car came down the road and I could see, silhouetted in the headlamps, a human figure, sprinting like an Olympian, its legs a blur and arms pumping.

“Come on, Itch, come on!” I urged, clenching my fist in support.

There was a flash of torchlight from the trees some way behind her but no sign of anyone firing. At least, not yet.

“Oh god!” I exclaimed and jumped to my feet as Itch tripped over something and fell. She rolled gracefully and came up running as though nothing had happened and I wanted to jump up and down and cheer her on. As it was I suddenly realised that I was standing, all alone, in a floodlit car park. An easy target. It was probably a good idea to get the hell out of sight so I made a run for the fence.

At some time in the past someone had put some thought into design and landscaping and planted what was, no doubt, an attractive bed of bougainvillea along the perimeter of the air force base. Over the course of time those bougainvillea had grown. Unfortunately those planners had not seen fit to include the bougainvillea within the scope of the floodlighting. So, when I reached the edge of the lighting and plunged into the extra dark area you always get at the edge of a lit area I didn't run into a fence, I ran into a bougainvillea. Beautiful though bougainvillea may be, they are also covered in thorns. Prison issue jumpsuits are not designed to be thorn proof. My arrival was painful, to say the least. I was still disentangling myself when Itch arrived. To my surprise she wasn't even breathing heavily. She helped me get free of the thorns.

“Thanks,” I said, ripping my leg away from the last of them. “You did a great job with the diversion. Are you OK?”

“Yes,” she said, still sounding breathless although she clearly wasn't. “Actually it was quite fun.”

I couldn't think of any appropriate reply to that so I patted her sympathetically on her arm instead.

Wayne, on the other hand, sounded like a steam train getting ready to depart the station and I used the sound to find where he was. Mattie was similarly gasping for breath and the others were clumped together with them.

“Spread out,” I hissed, waving my arms as Itch and I got close. “Try to find a gap in the fence.”

“The main gate is just down there,” said the man with the teeth, pointing. “It’s unmanned.”

“Awesome,” I said, feeling stupid. “Well, umm, let’s go, then.”

The soldiers were still searching amongst the trees and there was no sign that the two Wayne and Mattie had taken out had been discovered or even regained consciousness. We seemed to be all alone in this part of the base, apart from the occasional car that drove past. We trooped along beside the chain link fencing for perhaps a hundred metres or so, crouching each time a car’s headlights appeared. Sure enough there was no one at the entrance. There were two barriers, both down, blocking each side of the entrance road and a small light on top of a pole between the barriers. There was also a hut of some sort on each side but no people so we just walked out, skirting the barrier. It all seemed too easy.

“Now what?” I wondered, looking around.

It looked like the road had two lanes in each direction and a narrow strip of grass in the middle. What lay beyond I couldn’t see but there were no lights from buildings. I noticed the others were looking at me expectantly.

“Now what?” asked an angular skinny lad who looked to be about twelve. His glasses were skewed.

“You’re a hero, Nat,” said Mattie coming up close to me. He grabbed my hand and shook it. “Bloody awesome. See ya round.”

“Where’re you going?” I asked in surprise.

“Back to bloody Queensland,” he said. “If you’re ever up that way, look me up. Reckon I owe you a few beers.” He chuckled and slunk off along the side of the road.

“I’m off too,” said the girl who’d watched out of the window. “Gotta get back to Sydney. My baby’s there and ...” She choked up and gave me a hug. “Thanks for everything.”

“Good luck,” I said, as she, too, slunk off into the darkness.

“Anyone else off?” I asked, a little miffed for some reason.

I don't think I'd actually expected us to get out of there but now we had I kind of thought we'd stay together, for a while at least. Mutual support and that sort of thing.

“Not a lot of point,” said the guy who looked to be twelve. “Soon as daylight comes we'll be seen. We kind of stand out in these outfits.”

“So why did you come with us?” I asked.

“You seemed to know what you were doing,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, suppressing the urge to giggle. If only he knew I hadn't had a clue.

“So what do we do now?” he asked.

“Good question,” I thought. “I have no idea.”

Another set of headlights appeared and we all crouched as a car went past.

“We've got to get off the road,” I said when it had gone. “We've got to get away from here and staying on the road won't help.”

“You mean go bush?” asked a woman who hadn't spoken before.

“I don't see any other choices,” I said. “We can't stay here and if we stay on a road we'll be picked up quickly. As, umm, what's your name?”

“Clark,” said the boy.

“As Clark said, we stand out,” I continued. “If we go bush we can find somewhere to hide until morning then get ourselves organised.”

“Be good to get something to eat,” said the guy with the teeth.

“There's probably a takeaway round here,” said Clark sarcastically. “You got any money?”

“I suggest we cross the road,” I said hurriedly. “It seems more deserted that side.”

“Whatever we do we need to do it quickly,” said Wayne. “They'll be searching round here soon.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “Oh, I don't suppose anyone knows this area?”

There were muttered 'no's' and, sadly, not a single 'yes'.

“OK, then,” I said and pointed across the road. “That way.”

Chapter Ten

I dashed across the first two lanes and paused at the median strip. I glanced behind and the others were following me, straggling out in a line as each reached their own decision about what to do. A car's headlights appeared in the distance so I ran across the other two lanes then the narrow strip of rough grass. With a yelp I tumbled into a gully that lay beyond, obscured by the undergrowth. I landed on my shoulder, yet again, and let out a sharp 'aghh'.

"Are you all right, Nat?" called Marcie. "Where are you?"

"I'm OK," I called back, getting to my feet. "Be careful, there's a gully here."

I rubbed my shoulder then flexed it. It hurt to lift my arm and my jumpsuit was torn. As the passing car's lights lit up the trees I could see that the gully wasn't deep, barely up to my knees, but it had been unexpected. I also saw several yellow jumpsuits stand out brightly and cringed since they were an obvious giveaway. As Marcie, Itch and the others scrambled down into the gully I realised that, for the moment at least, it didn't matter about the jumpsuits. The Chinese knew damn well that we were still close to the base and if the occupants of the car reported us, which they might not, our reported position wouldn't be too much of a help.

"This way," I announced, heading along the gully.

The gully seemed to angle downwards and I felt going down would be easier than going up. I'd slowly picked and stumbled my way through the undergrowth in the dark for maybe twenty or thirty metres before I had a thought.

"How many of us should there be?"

I stopped and thought back and someone stumbled into me.

"How many of us are there?" I asked, clutching at the shape's arm.

"Jesus," came Marcie's voice. "Umm, there were eight of us before you

arrived and I think we all got out.”

“So that’s nine,” I said, “and Mattie and that other girl left so ...”

“Kaitlyn,” interjected Marcie.

“Why’ve we stopped?” came a male voice.

“I’m checking numbers,” I said. “Is anyone missing? There should be seven of us.”

There were a few moments confusion as everyone started trying to count everyone else.

“Stop!” I exclaimed. “Call out a number, one by one. Marcie, you first.”

There was still some confusion as a couple of times two people tried to call out the same number but we got as far as six, eventually.

“And I’m seven,” I said. “Awesome, we’re all still here. Right, we’ll keep following this gully and put some distance between us and the base then find somewhere to sleep. Anyone know when the moon will rise?”

No one did apparently.

“Never mind, we’ll do the best we can,” I told them. “Stay close together. We don’t want anyone getting lost.”

“Should we hold hands?” asked a female voice. It wasn’t Marcie and it wasn’t breathless so I guessed it was the other woman, as yet unnamed.

“If it helps,” I said. “Right, come on.”

We headed off, slowly picking our way along the gully. At one point it descended quite steeply and I made everyone wait while each person clambered down then checked the numbers again. No one was left behind so we continued. It got a little easier after an hour or so when the moon came up. It wasn’t a full moon, just a quarter or so but it

gave a ghostly grey tinge to the undergrowth and scattered rocks. If we'd had hiking boots it would have been easier but we were all barefoot and the terrain was taking its toll. It didn't help that my right arm was getting increasingly stiff and painful to move. Also the adrenaline rush of the breakout itself was fading and other little things, like thirst and hunger were beginning to make themselves known. I hadn't eaten since the evening before and had had nothing to drink since the mouthful I'd swallowed when having the shower. It seemed an eternity ago. When the others had last eaten or drunk I had no idea as I hadn't been there long enough to find out any of the routines.

A while later, it was difficult to tell how long but the moon, when I could see it through the trees, was getting quite high, I noticed the ground had become fairly level and the gully seemed to be getting wider. I stopped and waited for everyone to bunch up. There was enough light to do a headcount and no one seemed to be missing.

"I have no idea how far we've come or where we are," I said, "but we don't seem to be in the middle of town. I'm thinking it's time we stopped and got some sleep. When it's light we can see what's what and try to get organised in some way."

"Oh thank god," said one of the men. "I never did like bush walking, even in daylight."

"At least it's cool," said someone else. "This would have been murder around midday."

"What was that?" said someone else urgently.

We all froze and shut up.

"I thought I saw something, crossing the moon," she said.

"Probably a bird," said one of the guys.

"It, I don't know, it looked more like a big pizza box," she said.

There were several seconds of silence as we digested this, wondering

what kind of bird looked like a pizza box then someone exclaimed
“Shit, a drone!”

“Oh god,” I exclaimed as everyone started to panic react. “Get under cover!”

“No! Don't!” said one of the guys loudly. “Stay in the open and kneel down. Try to look like a kangaroo!”

“What!” someone exclaimed.

“Just do it! Now!” he shouted. “Trust me!”

I heard a whirr overhead and jumped for the nearest tree.

“Kangaroos!” shouted the voice. “Do it!”

It seemed an incredibly stupid notion but I sensed the two or three people nearest me were starting to kneel so I did as well. There was a sharp little stone under my knee but I ignored it. How do I look like a kangaroo? I visualised one and sat back on my heels as kangaroos have very big back legs. It occurred to me that they have very small front legs too so I held my forearms up in front of me like a Tyrannosaurus Rex, wishing I was a lot fiercer and braver.

The whirring got louder and I sensed something circling overhead. Tying to make my nose look like a kangaroo snout I glanced around. As far as I could tell we were all kneeling and looking stupid. Then, with a whoosh, the whirring shot off.

“Has it gone?” I asked.

“Give it a bit longer,” said the voice. “There may be another.”

I moved my knee to get it off the stone and that seemed to start a general movement among the others. Despite the risk of another drone, some started to stand up and others move to a sitting position. I chose to sit as I was feeling very drained and my brain was on the verge of giving up.

“So what was all that about?” I asked.

Someone edged over to me and, judging by the sudden gleam of white in the faint greyness of the moon, it was the man with the teeth.

“It's about perception and expectations,” he said. “Creating an illusion.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I said.

“It's dark,” he said, stating the obvious. “Drones can't see in the dark.”

“But why kangaroos?” I asked.

“It's about ...” he started then someone else called “I can hear water! Running water.”

“Explanations can wait,” I said holding up my hand. “We need water.”

“And food,” he added.

“Yeah, one thing at a time,” I said, heaving myself up and wincing from my arm. “Where's the water?”

“Seems to be that way,” said a vague shadowy shape.

“Lead on,” I said, not able to see which way the shape was pointing.

Whoever it was lead the way and whoever it was was right. A couple of hundred metres further on and down a couple of metres of steep slope was a small muddy beach. And a river. With cool, clear, fresh water.

* * *

I slept beautifully for my first sleep cycle then I woke up because I badly needed a pee having drunk too much water. The others seemed to be asleep, one or two snoring and several making whistling noises, scattered around me. I lay back down and for the rest of the night had fitful intermittent snatches of sleep. When I did I had strange

unpleasant dreams. Mostly though I lay there awake, thoughts swirling in my head interspersed with bouts of tension when a creature of the night rustled like a tracker. Had I really killed someone? Not just killed them but beaten them to death with my hands? I had no recollection of it whatsoever but Marcie had told me what I had done when that guard pushed me over. I found it barely credible but why would Marcie lie? A point that tended to support her was that I had no memory of anything after being pushed over, which was quite clear in my mind, until I ran into the washroom looking for a way out. It just seemed out of character for me. And, to be honest, it horrified me. Logically I supposed that, if forced too far, I could kill. Everyone would, I imagine, if the circumstances were extreme enough but being pushed over didn't seem really enough justification. To end someone's life, in a fairly brutal way, simply because he pushed me over? That didn't seem like the Natalia I thought I was. And what about his family?

I think, though, what horrified me more, was that I had no memory of it. It was as though some primordial part of me had taken over and my higher brain switched off for the duration. It was also scary. Would it happen again? Am I out of control? Am I a psychopath or schizoid or whatever the psychological term was? What if it was a friend not an enemy that I attacked next time? These thoughts circulated endlessly in my mind. As the night progressed and it got a little too cold to fall asleep again I ended up sitting with my knees drawn up under my chin and my arms wrapped around my legs just staring out over the darkly undulating river. Did I really see that guard as an enemy? And if so, did that mean I was now at war? And who with? Individual soldiers who came looking for me or all one and a half billion Chinese? How many more lives would I take before mine was taken? Somehow I had to come to terms with what I'd done and look to the future. If I was caught now, surely I would be executed. And what would become of my co-escapees? They would be deemed to be complicit at the very least.

I was wondering if it might be best, all round, if I turned myself in when I became aware of a noise. It was faint and seemed to go in fits and starts. I turned my head from side to side to try and place it and realised it was coming from the person who was lying behind and to my right. It seemed to be whoever it was was crying. Quietly but

persistently. I twisted onto my knees and edged over, wanting to offer comfort if I could but equally not wanting to intrude on something private.

She stopped when she heard my quiet crawl and I hesitated then reached out to touch where I thought her shoulder was. I felt her body stiffen.

“Are you OK?” I whispered.

“Uh huh,” she softly grunted back in a tone that said ‘go away’.

“I, umm, heard you crying,” I whispered.

“I’m sorry if I woke you,” she whispered back. “Is that you, Nat?”

“Yes,” I whispered, stroking her shoulder. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

She rolled over and sat up and I withdrew my hand.

“Ginny,” she said quietly. “Actually it’s Ginevra but everyone calls me Ginny.”

“Nice to meet you, Ginny,” I said, keeping my voice to a whisper. “That’s an unusual name.”

“It’s Italian,” she said. “I was born here but my parents are from Italy.”

“Right,” I said. “Well, I’d better let you get back to sleep.”

I started to edge away but she stopped me.

“What’s going to happen?” she asked.

I sat there in silence not knowing what to say. I’d been asking myself the same question and not yet come up with an answer I liked.

“I ... don’t know,” I temporised.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jumpsuit.

"I'm not like you," she said. "I was a cook in an Aged Care Facility. I don't know how to fight and live in the bush like you."

"What do you mean, like me?" I asked in surprise. "I was a driving instructor in a small country town."

"But you're a resistance fighter," she said. "You've got training and you don't get scared. I saw you ... hit that soldier."

"No, you've got it all wrong ..." I started but she suddenly burst into tears again.

"I'm so scared," she sobbed, "so scared."

"Oh god," I thought and instinctively put my arms around her. She pushed into me, her tears soaking the front of my jumpsuit.

"Hush now," I said quietly, stroking her hair. "Hush now, everything's going to turn out just fine."

I was pretty sure that was a lie but she didn't want the cold harsh reality of armed soldiers with tracker dogs and helicopters on our trail when the dawn broke. That could wait.

I cuddled her for a while, quietly saying reassuring things and she seemed to draw strength from me. Then she hit me with a king punch.

"Yeah, you'll keep us safe, won't you, Nat." she said, pulling away from my hug. "We'll be fine with you here. I know that."

"What??" I wanted to scream. "Me?? How the hell do I do that??"

I was searching for the words to let her down gently when a figure loomed.

"You two can't sleep either?" whispered Marcie, sitting down the other side of Ginny. "Jesus, it's cold."

There was a sudden noise in the bushes and all three of us froze. Nothing happened and we slowly relaxed.

"It'll be dawn soon," I said. "It'll warm up then."

"It's the waiting," she said, hugging her knees. "I know they're going to come after us but it's the sitting here waiting that's getting to me. At least if I'm running away I'm doing something."

"We've got to get out of these clothes," I said. "If we look like normal people I'm sure there'll be ... options, but looking like this we stand out."

"Yeah," she said, "I guess. Just can't stand the waiting."

"Are you scared too?" asked Ginny.

"Scared ain't the word for it," said Marcie with a forced sounding laugh. "I'm not tough like Nat."

I was about to ask where they'd got their weird, freaky ideas about me when a breathless voice asked if she could join us.

"Sure," I said, "did we wake you?"

"No, I could not sleep," said Itch. "I have been trying to meditate. Zen can help in situations like this."

"How?" I asked, since I hadn't been able to think of anything that might help.

"Zen teaches us to be mindful of the present moment," she said, sitting beside me. "The past cannot be changed and the future will be what it will be regardless of our fears."

"So you're not scared?" asked Ginny.

"Scared?" said Itch slowly. "Yes, I am scared but I have lived with fear for many years. Perhaps I have learnt to contain it to an extent."

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why’ve you been afraid for years?”

“I am Japanese,” she said. “The Chinese hate us. I came here as a student in 2023 and when the Chinese invaded they closed the borders to the Japanese. Slowly they have been arresting us. I continued with my studies but all the time I have been waiting for my arrest and internment. Many others I know have already been taken away.”

“Wow,” I said. “That must have been hard. Why do the Chinese hate you?”

“We are neighbours,” she said. “There has been little love lost between us for centuries but, in truth, their hatred comes from the 1930s when Japan invaded China. We were not nice to the Chinese and they have long memories. Now they take their revenge.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty hot on revenge,” said Marcie. “That’s why I’m here too.”

There was another noise from the bushes and Ginny gave a stifled half gasp, half sob.

“Shhh,” I hissed. “We’re talking too loudly.”

“Sorry,” whispered Marcie.

One of the guys gave a spluttery snore and we froze again. To say we were jumpy would be an understatement.

“It’ll be dawn soon,” I whispered. “The sky seems to be lightening over there.”

“So what are we going to do?” asked Itch so quietly I could barely hear her. “Do you have a plan?”

“I’m ... not sure,” I whispered. “I guess it depends on what everyone else wants to do. I mean, do we break up and find our own solutions or do we stay as a group or what?”

"I don't want to be alone," said Ginny instantly, gripping my arm. "If you leave me I'll just turn myself in. I can't do this on my own."

"It's OK, sweetie," I said. "We won't leave you on your own."

Her grip slackened but she didn't remove her hand.

"There are advantages to staying as a group," said Itch gravely, "but also disadvantages."

"So what do you want to do?" I asked. "You can leave any time you want."

In the growing light I saw a shadow of a smile cross her lips.

"I would like to stay where I am welcome," she said, "but my face may be disadvantageous to you."

"You mean because you look Chinese?" asked Marcie.

"To an Australian, I do," she said, "and that could work against you. To the Chinese, however, I am obviously Japanese and will attract attention where Caucasians would not."

"That doesn't matter," I said. "If you want to stay with us then you will be one of us and that's all there is to it."

"Your words please me," she said and put her hands together and gave me a little bow. It was a surprisingly moving gesture.

A loud, ripping growl rang through our small clearing and Ginny almost screamed. Itch jumped to her feet and Marcie and I lurched forward, not as quick in rising as Itch.

"Sorry," whispered Wayne loudly. "Haven't eaten for two days."

He rolled onto his side and slowly climbed to his feet. "Gotta piss," he said and headed for the bushes.

It was now light enough to make out shapes clearly and I could see

there was only one person still lying on the ground. I did a quick head count, allowing for Wayne being out of sight.

“Who's missing?” I hissed.

Ginny, Marcie and Itch looked at each other then at the body on the ground. I marched over and it was the toothy guy.

“That's Alex,” said Marcie. “Where's Clark?”

Alex opened one eye and looked gloomily at me then rolled over to face the other way.

“I don't know,” I said. “Anyone know where he was sleeping? Maybe he's behind a bush or something. Hey, Wayne.”

“Yeah?” he said, emerging from behind a bush.

“Where was Clark sleeping?” I asked. “Only we can't find him.”

“Oh, shit,” he said, scratching the back of his head and looking round. “Can't say as I remember. Hey, the rifle's gone.”

“What rifle?” I asked.

“The one I took off that guard,” he said, looking around where he'd been lying. “You remember, you carried it for a while.”

“Ohh, I'd forgotten,” I said. In truth the whole of our escape was now something of a blur. “Shit, do you think he's taken the rifle and skipped out on us?”

“Could be,” said Wayne. “He's a weird little bugger.”

“Well, there's not a lot we can do about it now,” I said. “Alex, you awake?”

“No,” he said.

“Wake up then,” I said. “It's nearly dawn and we've got to figure out

what the hell to do. For certain the Chinese will be out searching for us soon. They might have tracker dogs with them.”

“Oh great,” said Alex, “and there was me having a sleepless night trying not to think about that. Thanks.”

There was a sudden crashing of something large in the undergrowth and we all panicked. I felt an icy barb run through my insides and my bladder suddenly felt weak. We all scattered, making for the trees, leaving Alex to get stiffly to his feet unaided.

“Yo! Freedom Fighters!” called a voice loudly. “Hey, this is an awesomely cool gun!”

Chapter Eleven

I could have killed the grinning idiot with my bare hands.

Clark had jumped out of the undergrowth waving the rifle above his head with one hand and was pretending to take pot shots at imaginary things around us, scaring the living daylights out of us all.

I stormed over and snatched the gun out of his hand.

“Be quiet, you stupid fool,” I hissed. “Keep you bloody mouth shut!”

“What?” he exclaimed in surprise, no doubt hurt that his joke had gone wrong.

“There are probably hundreds of Chinese out searching for us,” I hissed vehemently. “You shouting is going to tell them where we are. For crying out loud! Jesus!”

I couldn't see his eyes because the pre-dawn light was behind me and making his glasses opaque but his face showed he was starting to go into that sullen non-hearing state that teenagers do when they're being lectured by adults. I used to do it myself when I was a teenager. What I hadn't realised back then was how infuriating it is and that it makes the situation worse. Realising that now didn't stop me from getting infuriated and laying into him.

“There could be Chinese over there,” I said, trying to keep my voice down but putting every ounce of anger into it. “They could be twenty metres away at this moment! And you, you thoughtless tosser start shouting and telling them where we are! Do you want to get us all recaptured? Huh, huh?”

I may even have started to prance a little in my agitation. Clark got a little more sullen and just stood there, his glasses glinting aggressively, but he didn't reply. I started to turn away then noticed I had the gun in my hand.

“And you've told them we're armed!” I screamed quietly at him. “That means they won't be coming in to ask questions, they'll be coming in

with guns blazing. Probably with helicopter support and god knows what else! Is that what you want? Is it, is it?"

I waved the gun under his nose but he didn't react beyond stepping backwards slightly and his whole body drooped.

"You want to get us all killed, is that it?" I carried on, not really giving him a chance to reply. "Is that what you want? Why don't you save us all the effort and do it now, huh? Come on ..." and I slammed the rifle against his chest, "... just shoot me now and get it over with. Come on, take the bloody thing. You think it's so awesome, just shoot me. Come on, come on!"

He didn't make any attempt to take the gun so after several futile attempts at pushing it onto his chest I stormed off, calling him a "stupid bloody useless idiot" in parting. The others were standing around in embarrassed silence and Ginny skipped out of my way.

I didn't go far. Maybe fifty metres or so downriver I came to a halt and dropped the gun and just stood there, shocked at my reaction. Then I squatted down and swore at myself before half falling backwards. Then the tears started. I sat there with my legs stuck out in front of me and my hands limp at my sides, tears flowing copiously.

I don't know how long I stayed like that. Perhaps five minutes, perhaps ten. Anyway, my tears dried up and I stared listlessly out over the river. There were houses on the other side but I didn't see them.

"You got that out of your system then, girl?" said Wayne.

I looked behind and he was kneeling on the ground a short distance away half hidden by some bushes.

"Yeah," I said. "I think so. How long have you been there?"

"Long enough," he said and patted the ground beside him. "Come back here, out of sight." He pointed across the river and only then did I see the houses. I scrambled backwards and got behind the bush.

"Marcie said you was interrogated for a couple of months," he said

sympathetically and I nodded. "Yeah, must have been hard going through that then all that shit at the base right after."

"Yeah," I said sadly, feeling wrung out and hung up to dry. "I didn't plan any of this. It all just ... happened, and now we're here. We've got nothing, not even any food, and the whole frigging world is against us. I'm not ... coping ... very well. 'Specially as everyone is looking to me for answers."

I looked at his comforting bulk, his ripped jumpsuit in tatters at the front and the half healed scratches from where he'd been pulled through the washroom window, and shook my head.

"I don't have any answers," I muttered. "I wish I did but I don't."

"Come 'ere, love," he said and wrapped a big arm around me. I didn't resist and he pulled me against his chest and enveloped me in a big hug. "You're doing just bloody great. You got us out of there and away without anyone getting hurt, well, not none of us any road. Who gives a shit about them slanty eyed bastards anyway, hey? Weren't for you we'd be off to the Project in the next day or two and probably end up dying there. Seems to me you've given us a second chance, like."

"A chance for what though?" I asked, my voice muffled by his dirty jumpsuit.

"Gawd knows," he said, "but that's the way of it, ain't it. You gets your chances in life and it's up to you to take 'em, see."

"But I've forced this on the rest of you," I said, pulling back. "I'm not giving any of you much of a chance at all."

"Sure you have," he said. "Ain't none of us had to come, did we. Could have stayed back at that base and dobbed you in, or left and gone our own way like Mattie and Kaitlyn."

"So why didn't you?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Reckon as how I could see you had what it takes," he said. "I ain't no leader, ain't much of a follower, neither, mind. I goes

me own way most of the time but I reckon you got what it takes. Makes no never mind if you don't have the answers. You'll think of something. You feeling better now?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think I just got overwrought." I sighed. "It wasn't Clark's fault. In some weird way I almost envy him because he's just happy to be free and not bogged down in what lies ahead. I suppose I'd better go back and apologise, if he hasn't run off. I wouldn't blame him if he did. I wouldn't want to be on the run with a mad woman."

"You ain't mad," said Wayne, "and although he's a strange bugger he ain't stupid. He won't run off. Knows his best chance is to stay with you, just like me."

"Oh, you're full of shit," I said, feeling a lot calmer and almost happy, "but thank you."

"You ain't the first to notice that, love," he said, beaming at me. "Come on, let's be getting back."

"I'll just get the gun," I said, standing up. I went over and picked it up and scurried back to the shelter of the bushes. "Hey, this is the weirdest gun I've ever seen."

It was the first time I'd actually looked at the rifle and it was weird. It was basically a length of square cross section hard plastic with half a dozen tubes hanging off the front two thirds. At the other end was a boxy slab and in between was a hollowed out pistol grip and a trigger.

"It's one of them electric guns," he said. "I've seen pictures but they're only for military use."

"You mean like a Taser?" I asked, gingerly turning it over in my hands. It had a small panel like the screen of a mobile phone on the upper surface.

"Nah," he said. "See them tubes? They're electric coils. When you press the trigger they discharge and push a lump of metal out at high speed. Could be anything, ball bearings, nails, screws, don't matter so long as there's some iron in it."

“Does that make them better than normal guns?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said, starting to walk back through the bushes. “You don't need any fancy bullets with cordite inside. All you got to do is recharge the battery every now and then and you can make your own bullets out of whatever's handy.”

“So how are we going to recharge it?” I asked.

“Gawd knows,” he said, “but where would we get bullets for a normal gun? I reckon it'll be useful for scaring people at any rate.”

“I guess,” I said. “Here, you take it. I don't know how to use it.”

“No sweat, love,” he said.

We emerged back on the beach where we'd spent the night. Clark was sitting on his own, as far away from the others as possible. I sighed. I knew what I had to do although I really didn't want to. What I wanted to do was run away and go back to my pokey little duplex in Juma Creek and Paige's endless worrying about budgets.

“Clark,” I said, sitting down beside him.

He glanced at me then looked back out over the river.

“I, umm, I want to apologise,” I said softly. “For my outburst.”

He didn't say anything, just sat there, a little stiffly.

“I've had a hell of a time over the last couple of months,” I said, a little confused by his lack of reaction, “and the stress of last night just got to me. I'm sorry for taking it out on you.”

He bent forward and pluck a grass stem and toyed with it. Then he looked at me and I was surprised to see tracks in the dirt on his face. It looked like he'd cried a little as well. Then I wondered what my face must look like.

“OK,” he said then stared at the stem he was shredding.

“Umm, we’re going to have a meeting,” I said. “We need to decide what to do next and how to do it. Will you join us?”

“Sure,” he said, “if you want me to.”

“I want you to,” I said. “Come on.”

I got up and walked back to the others. It occurred to me that we were visible from the other side of the river so I beckoned them to follow and we trooped into the bushes. I noticed that Clark followed, perhaps reluctantly, but at least he followed.

“OK,” I said when we were all sitting down. “It seems to me that we absolutely have to find some different clothing. Once we look fairly normal we’ll at least have a chance to find food but at the moment we’ll stand out like a sore thumb.”

No one seemed to disagree although Marcie asked how we were going to find other clothes since we didn’t have any money.

“We’re going to have to steal them,” I said. “There are some houses on the other side of the river so there’ll be people there. I suggest we get across the river and see if anyone has left their washing hanging on the line. We’ll need to cross the river anyway as most likely the Chinese will be bringing in dogs to help find us.”

“Why don’t we go into town?” asked Itch. “There’ll be op shops, clothing shops and laundries we could raid as well.”

“I don’t know where the town is,” I said.

“It’s about a kilometre downriver,” said Itch. “There’s a bridge as well. I saw it when I was exploring while you were gone.”

“Excellent,” I said, delighted that someone had kept their wits about them. “It’s only just dawn so very few people will be about. With a bit of luck most of us will be able to get clothes from back yards before we get to town and in town we can start looking for food. I daresay food will be more difficult to steal but we have to try.”

“What about the surveillance?” asked Ginny.

“Ahh, I'd forgotten about that,” I said. “It was only just being introduced in my town when I got arrested. I don't really know anything about it.”

“As soon as one of the cameras sees any of us we'll get arrested,” said Ginny, “and if Penrith is anything like Sydney there'll be cameras everywhere.”

“Ahh,” I said and thought about it. “OK, this could be a bit of a problem. Any ideas anyone?”

They all looked blankly at me, except Clark who was looking at his hands.

“OK,” I said slowly, not having thought of anything.

“Do I have permission to speak?” asked Clark.

“Of course you do,” I said, trying to keep the irritation off my face. After all, he was one of the group.

“Surveillance isn't a problem,” he said.

“Why's that?” I asked.

“Nothing will happen if the cameras don't see your face,” he said. “Can't recognise it if they don't see it and even if they do not a lot will happen.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The camera will send the image back to a data centre,” he said. “The systems there will analyse whoever's face it is and match it to a face in the data banks. Assuming the system identifies the face correctly and they're only about 90% accurate, it'll probably send an alert since we'll be listed as prisoners, although they probably won't have updated the records yet to say we've escaped.”

“But that's the problem,” I said. “When the alert is raised either the police or soldiers will be sent to catch us.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but it'll take time. Probably fifteen minutes, maybe more, before someone is sent out. They've got other things to do, remember. So if we just keep moving they'll have a problem keeping up. Not like the coppers will materialise out of thin air.”

“Actually that's a good point,” I said. “But won't they track where we're going and anticipate where we'll be?”

“So make random changes of direction,” he said. “Duck down alleys, go in and out of car parks and stuff. Once we're out of this yellow crap it'll be easier.”

“But they'll still recognise our faces,” said Alex. “It's only a matter of time.”

“So get some clag asap,” said Clark.

“Clag?” I asked. “What, you mean that glue stuff?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“I'm missing something here,” I said. “What good would clag do?”

“Don't any of you know how facial recognition works?” he asked with an air of bemusement.

“Assume we don't,” I said, knowing I didn't.

“Oh, OK,” he said. “Well, you know people wear makeup and jewellery and stuff?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Their algorithm ignores all that,” he said. “Same with hair and hats and stuff. Too easy to change. What it does is look at bone structure which can't be changed. The algorithm examines the image and makes a digital map of the bones in the face. So all you have to do is change

your bones.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” I said, “but how does the clag come into it?”

“It sticks to the skin,” he said. “Use it to change the shape of your bones. Especially around the eye sockets, cheek bones and jaw. Don’t need much. Most people’s faces are more or less the same size. Just need a millimetre or so extra width here and there and you look totally different. Comes off easily enough too. Just don’t put any on your cheeks as it’ll crack when you talk.”

I stared at him, lost for words. It seemed a little too easy.

“You know this works?” asked Itch.

“Done it a couple of times,” he said. “Oh, and don’t try to get it identical each side. One of the big things the algorithm looks for is asymmetry as everyone’s face is asymmetric to some extent. If your cheek bones sticks out a little more on one side or your nose is crooked it’ll stop the system finding a match.”

“But won’t it be obvious?” asked Wayne. “Clag is white.”

“The algorithm ignores colour,” he said.

“But people don’t,” I said. “Won’t the seven of us wandering around with patches of white on our faces attract attention?”

“So get some of that makeup stuff,” he said. “You know, that powder girls put on their faces.”

“And you’ve definitely done it yourself?” asked Itch.

“Sure,” said Clark.

“What did you get arrested for?” I asked since it occurred to me that he might have been arrested for trying to fool the facial recognition system.

“Not that,” he said with a snort. “I got done for hacking.”

“Couldn't have been much good as a hacker then,” said Alex snidely.

“Listen, matey,” said Clark, rounding on him, “I never got caught hacking. I got done 'cos someone I thought was a friend shopped me.”

“OK, OK,” I said, sensing some antagonism between Clark and Alex. “We can get clag pretty much anywhere, can't we?”

“Yes, newsagents, supermarkets, art supplies,” said Ginny.

“How about beards?” asked Wayne. “Does the facial thing see beards?”

“No,” said Clark. “Too easy to shave or grow one.”

“Can see a bit of a problem here,” said Wayne. “For us men, anyway,” and he flicked his stubbled chin with his hand. “We were only allowed to shave on Thursdays so this is four days worth. How's clag going to stick to beard hair?”

All three of the men had stubble to one degree or another.

“So we get some shavers as well,” said Clark. “First time in town we can just work on eyes and cheek bones.”

“But surely the system will pick us up and not find a match and send an alert anyway?” said Marcie.

Clark snorted again.

“Nah,” he said. “First up if the algorithm can't find a match so it goes back and re-analyses the image. It'll do that a few times then flag the image as unknown. Second up it's a new system here so a lot of people don't have images in the system yet. In China everyone's been imaged so they'll stop the person and get ID and link the new image to them but not here. In a few years, maybe.”

“But won't they use our gaits?” asked Ginny. “I've heard they can do that now.”

Clark seemed to like snorting.

"It's bullshit," he said. "Sure they have the technology and they spread it around to scare people but it isn't worth diddly squat. They need a minimum of an hour's video to analyse and it takes nine or ten minutes to do the analysis. There's no way they're going to get an hour of any of us and they've nothing to match it to anyway."

"You seem to know a lot about the algorithm," I said.

Clark gave a wry smile. "Me and some mates online have been trying to hack it for a few years," he said. "Easiest way to beat facial recognition is to change the stored analysis of your face in the system but we haven't been able to get in yet."

"Oh well," I said. "'We don't have net access anyway so it wouldn't be much help. Still, it looks like we have a way forward. We get across the river and find some clothes then we get hold of some clag and change our appearances. Oh, Clark, do we have to wear the clag all the time?"

"Only when you're near cameras," he said. "Otherwise just take it off and put more on when you need to."

"OK," I said. "So, anything else we need to do urgently?"

"Find food," said Marcie.

"Yup, that too," I said. "Water won't be a problem so long as we stay within reach of the river. I suggest we split up into pairs, that way we can cover more ground."

"There's seven of us," said Itch.

"I prefer to work alone," said Wayne.

"Sweet," I said. "So, Clark, you go with Marcie. You're similar in ages and build so you might find two sets of clothes at the same place. Itch and Ginny, you go together." It occurred to me that Ginny, being of a nervous disposition, might benefit from Itch's Zen calm but I couldn't say that. "Alex, you come with me."

"Yes, boss," he said, pointing a finger at me like a gun. "Where do we

meet up afterwards?”

“Good question,” I said. “Any suggestions?”

“We don't want to draw attention to ourselves,” he said, “and people loitering draw attention. The best place would be by the bridge.”

“Why the bridge?” asked Marcie. “Wouldn't it be better to come back here?”

“If we're seen here,” said Alex, “someone will wonder why. On the other hand, there's usually a recreation park beside a bridge so people sitting in groups will be a common sight, especially if they're eating. And there won't be cameras around, so long as we stay away from the edges.”

“That's good thinking,” I said. “Excellent. So, we'll cross the river, split up, find clothes, clag and some food and meet back somewhere near the bridge. I don't suppose anyone knows what the time is?”

“We had to leave what little we had behind,” said Wayne. “Although we weren't allowed no phones and you politicals weren't allowed anything.”

“So who else is political?” I asked.

“Itch, Alex and Marcie,” said Wayne, “and you. The rest of us are just criminals, like.”

Chapter Twelve

"I'm surprised a stage magician would be seen as a threat to the Chinese Empire," I remarked to Alex as we strolled along the residential street that ran beside the river on our way to the bridge.

I'd had the rather good idea of tearing up my jumpsuit to make a pair of shorts and a sleeveless crop top. Admittedly I probably looked a bit of a weirdo but at least I wasn't so obviously an escaped prisoner. Unfortunately I hadn't had the idea until after we'd separated from the others and every now and then we could see a yellow suited figure dash from one bush to another in the distance. Alex had also made himself a pair of shorts and had had the good fortune to find a filthy black t-shirt in the gutter which looked like it had been used at some point in the not too recent past to wash a car. We'd thrown the tattered leftovers of the jumpsuits into the river in the vague hope they might be found and the wearers, us, presumed to have drowned. It was unlikely since even the Chinese would quickly spot that what they'd found was just the arms and legs but you never know.

We stopped at the corner and scanned the houses down the side street for any sign of laundry hanging out to dry. It seemed that, although this estate wasn't a wealthy one, the houses being cheap weatherboard and many in need of paint and some minor repairs, it wasn't the poorest of neighbourhoods and the occupants had hot air driers. Either that or they didn't wash much. There were no clothes flapping happily on washing lines in the early sun so we crossed the road and continued walking.

"I imagine they think that all entertainers have influence," said Alex, "since most of us have a following of some kind although never having been streamed on one of the majors my following is small and mostly limited to the RSLs around Bankstown and Liverpool. Still, magicians deal in illusion and misdirection so I suppose they have a point."

"So what did you do that got you arrested?" I asked.

There was a house up ahead with what might have been some clothes hanging over the verandah but as I got closer I could see an older woman watching us from a window.

“I made a stupid joke,” he said. “After making Janey, my assistant, disappear from inside a box I told the audience that not even I could make the Chinese disappear. It got a laugh but someone complained and I was arrested later that evening. Janey too but they let her go the next day.”

“And you got sent to the Project for that?” I asked. “Seems a bit harsh. How long for?”

“Until my self criticism and re-education program shows I have learnt to be socially more responsible,” said Alex as we walked past a front yard strewn with broken armchairs and discarded bottles. “It was the same with Marcie.”

“Why? What happened to her?” I asked then stopped walking. “Just a minute.”

I turned to look at the front yard then hurried Alex around the corner so we were out of sight of anyone looking through the windows. Although the front fence was a simple wire one, the side was bounded by a scrubby hedge.

“What is it?” asked Alex.

“That house,” I said, “the one we just went past. Looks like they had a party last night.”

“Yeah, I saw all the bottles,” said Alex. “What of it? You annoyed you weren’t invited?”

“But did you see the barbecue?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure there was still some food on it.”

“Jesus,” said Alex, peering back to see if he could see around the hedge. “Food!”

“Yeah,” I said. “We’ll walk back past and you keep any eye open for anyone watching and magic up a distraction if someone comes out although judging by the number of bottles we should be safe for quite a few hours.”

“What sort of distraction?” he asked, looking worried. “What if it's a bikies chapter house or something and there's a whole bunch of them and they're armed?”

“No bikes,” I said. “But it could be a crack house although I don't remember reading that crack users eat or drink much so they'll be stoned as well as drunk. Anyway, you be ready and I'll slip between the wires and grab what food I can.”

“I'm not happy about this,” he said. “Hecklers in the audience is one thing but crazies pissed 'cos we're stealing their food is another.”

“No, you're right,” I said, a touch sarcastically. “We've not long had breakfast. If we keep on eating like this we'll get too fat. Come on.”

“Oh god,” he said but followed me back around the corner anyway.

The yard was quite overgrown and there were tracks of churned up dirt where vehicles had been driven into the yard but, over by the corner of the house near the hedge, was a barbecue. It was fairly old and rusty looking but it was littered with things that looked like they might be edible and a couple of birds were pecking away. Nearby was a battered door which, judging by the things on the window sill next to it, lead to a kitchen. Further along were three more windows, curtained on the inside with mismatched blankets. The fence consisted of four wooden posts with two lengths of wire, one at waist height and one at knee height. I scanned the front of the house and couldn't see any signs of life. I could hear an older petrol engined car grinding along a couple of streets away but there was no sound from this house.

“OK,” I whispered. “Looks clear. Keep walking slowly and try to look innocent.”

“OK,” he whispered back out of the corner of his mouth.

I quickly stuck one leg between the wires then stooped to get under the top one then ran through the long grass and between a couple of armchairs to get to the barbecue. The birds saw me coming and flew off to perch on the hedge to wait for me to go. The barbecue was stone cold, of course, but to my delight there were several chicken

wings and sausages stuck to the barbecue with congealed fat and a half empty packet of sliced white bread. There were also some disgusting looking mushy fried onions and a bottle of tomato sauce which I ignored. Several slices of bread with beak marks were scattered around and a couple of the sausages had holes in them but they didn't look too bad. I grabbed the bread bag and opened it to stuff the wings and sausages inside then dropped the lot in panic when a big dog started barking and hurling itself at the kitchen door. The birds disappeared with a squawk as the door reverberated from the repeated attacks.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit,” I muttered, scrabbling desperately for the food that had spilled onto the ground.

I stuffed it all back inside the bread bag again then froze as a petulant male voice hurled abuse at the dog. The dog took no notice and started scrabbling viciously at the door. It was only then that I noticed there were long grooves carved in the door on the outside. They seemed to start about chest height so it must be a big dog. I half turned to run but noticed there were still a couple of wings on the barbecue. I lurched back to grab them just as something heavy shook the door. It sounded like someone had thrown a boot at the dog or something like that. I froze in case the owner of the boot came to collect it but the dog stopped barking. Clutching my bag of goodies I started to creep back across the yard then nearly dropped the lot again as a canine head the size of a shire horse appeared at the window. It saw me and tried to jump through the window but only succeeded in knocking off all the things that had been on the window sill. The verbal abuse from inside resumed, this time with the higher overtones of a female accompaniment. I edged backwards, keeping an eye on the dog slavering madly at the window, very conscious that its teeth were scraping down the glass, until I felt the back of an armchair against my backside. I turned and my bare foot felt something cold in the grass. I glanced down then grabbed the silvery thing without conscious thought then slipped between the chairs and made a dash for the fence.

Seeing me run back, Alex turned and marched back. He pulled up the top wire to help me slip through just as something happened inside the house and the dog started whining. Someone had probably kicked

it. Quickly we disappeared around the corner and hurried away. A couple of corners later we stopped to catch our breaths and listen for any hue and cry.

“You should have seen your face when that dog started barking,” said Alex. “I thought you were going to have a heart attack.”

“So did I,” I said. “Still, look at this,” and I waved the bread bag in front of his face.

“Oooh, whatcha got?” he said, his eyes locked on the bag and his hands trying to snatch it from me.

“Sausages, chicken wings and bread,” I said.

“Awesome,” he said. “You’re a hero. What’s that in your other hand?”

I looked at it and discovered it was a mobile phone.

“Here, take this,” I said, handing Alex the bread bag. He immediately opened it and pulled out a sausage.

He wiped the bits of grass and dirt off it then looked at the beak marks before shrugging and stuffing it in his mouth.

“Looks quite old,” I said, turning the phone over and over in my hands. “It doesn’t have a fingerprint reader.”

“Better turn it off though,” he said, his mouth full. “Whoever it belongs to might have a tracking app on it.”

I pressed the button on the side that usually turns phones on and off and the screen lit up. The wallpaper picture was of a fairly ugly man leering at the camera and waving a hand with the first and little fingers extended. I noticed that the time was 06:53. I pressed the button again and held it in for a few seconds and the option to power off appeared. I touched it and the screen went blank.

“I’ll hang on to this,” I said. “It could be useful until it’s reported missing and disconnected.”

“OK,” said Alex. “This is crappy bread though.”

“Don't eat it then,” I said. “Are there any sausages left?”

“Sure,” he said, holding the bag out to me.

I took a couple of sausages and several slices of bread to eat as we started walking again. He was right. The bread was cheap and nasty and tasted a little of sweat. It was also a bit soggy from the condensation inside the bag, but hunger doesn't really care about these things.

* * *

After a while we came to what was probably the centre of town. It was lined with shops, none of which were open yet as it was barely seven in the morning. There was some traffic but no one seemed to take any notice of us. One of those robot camera things emerged from an alleyway and paused for a few moments, scanning the pavements. Fortunately the camera was pointing away from us when it emerged. I grabbed Alex as soon as I saw it and hurled him against the display window of the pharmacy we were passing.

“Pretend you're talking to me about that,” I said quietly, pointing to a display of herbal supplements.

Fortunately Alex had his wits about him and started reading the wonderful benefits of the various supplements aloud to me. He kept pointing at things while keeping his head turned away from the camera. I leaned in to him as though listening and managed to keep his head between my face and the camera.

“Oh no,” I muttered, “it's coming towards us.”

“Look at those,” said Alex, pointing further down the display and away from the camera. “I've really been thinking recently about getting some incontinence nappies for men.”

“Do they pick up audio as well?” I whispered.

"Don't know," he whispered back. "Assume they do."

"Well, if they'll help you stop wetting the bed," I said in a reasonably loud voice. "And they'll save a fortune on washing the doona every day."

"They don't give a price," he said. "Do you suppose they come in different colours?"

I heard the robot whine quietly past without stopping and glanced at it out of the corner of my eye. Its camera seemed to be pointing further down the road.

"Probably not," I said. "You're meant to wear them under trousers, not on top."

The robot continued along the road and we both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Looks like it didn't care about us," whispered Alex. "Let's get away from here."

We both turned to walk in the opposite direction then I stopped and turned back.

"No," I said. "We don't know where we're going and there are more shops that way as well. If we follow it we can keep an eye on it. We're probably less likely to run into another one as well. I'm guessing they don't overlap their routes."

"If you say so," said Alex, "but won't it get suspicious if it sees us following it?"

"It's just a camera on wheels," I said. "Its algorithm will probably just assume we happen to be going the same way. After all, that must happen quite often."

"You're right, of course," he said as we started to follow the robot. "It's all about giving the audience what they expect to see. It worked with the drone so it should work here too."

“What do you mean, with the drone?” I asked. I hoped we looked like a fairly normal couple walking along the street having a conversation, despite our strange clothing.

“Last night,” he said. “Don't you remember?”

“Last night?” I said, puzzled.

“Pretending to be kangaroos,” he said. “It seemed to work. Don't you remember?”

“I thought I'd dreamt that,” I said. “So we really pretended to be kangaroos? Why?”

“It was dark,” he said. “Wayne had said something to me about drones earlier and it occurred to me that normal cameras can't see in the dark so they'd be using infrared.”

“Well, probably,” I said, “but why kangaroos?”

“It's the basic principle of magic,” said Alex. “Show people what they expect to see and they won't see what you're really doing. At night in the bush you expect to see kangaroos. There are hundreds of them out there but there were only seven of us and kangaroos are roughly the same size as people. So when the drone appeared I got everyone to behave like kangaroos.”

“But wouldn't the drone see the difference?” I asked. The robot camera ahead turned a corner and I wondered if we should still keep following it.

“That's the thing,” said Alex, “infrared images are really just blobs of heat with no real features. So long as we had the same sort of shape as a kangaroo the operators would assume we were kangaroos. They'd expect escaped people to be blobs of heat behind bushes and trees.”

“I'd have never thought of that,” I said. “Good thinking. Wait a moment.”

We'd reached the corner and I looked to see where the robot was

going, uncertain about following.

“Come back,” I said suddenly and stepped backwards, out of sight if the robot should turn around.

Alex stepped backwards before asking why, which was impressive. Many people would have asked why first.

“There's an op shop down there,” I said. “About four shops down and on this side.”

“How do you know?” he asked. “You can't read the signs of the shops this side.”

“True,” I said, “but there were donations outside. They're piled on the pavement.”

“Right,” he said. “Clothes.”

“Yup,” I said. “We'll just wait a little for the robot to go somewhere else. We don't want it seeing us going through the stuff left outside.”

“You're good at this,” he said. “Where did you learn?”

“Just naturally talented, I guess,” I said, peering round the corner, “But I was hoping we'd find an op shop.” The robot was still rolling along but its camera was pointing ahead of it, not behind.

“I've never been inside one,” he said. “What do they sell?”

“Pretty much anything,” I said, “but usually a lot of clothes and toys and other odds and ends that people are throwing out.”

“So people just dump their trash outside?” he asked, “and the shop takes it in and sells it?”

“More or less,” I said. “The proceeds are for charities.”

I peered around again and the robot was nowhere to be seen. I decided to wait a little longer in case it had just gone to inspect an

alley or something.

"I always thought they were the same as reject shops," he said. "You learn something every day."

"You've never bought second hand clothes?" I asked.

"No, never," he said.

"Good for you," I said. "Not everyone can afford new clothes all the time. OK, let's go and see if there's anything worth having."

We turned the corner and walked casually towards the op shop. There were traffic lights at this junction and three of four cars were queued, waiting for the lights to change. With so little going on at this time of day it was inevitable that someone in the cars would be watching us. I made Alex wait until the lights had changed and the cars gone before letting him start going through the bags and cardboard boxes.

"What size are you?" he asked after a while.

"10," I said, "and a six in shoes."

"OK, this is a 14," and he dropped the dress he was holding.

I curled my lip at him for thinking I might fit a 14 but he didn't notice.

"This jacket might fit you?" I said, holding up a dark grey blazer. "Try it on."

"Not bad," he said, pulling it on. "I'd prefer a pale blue, though."

It took a few minutes but we managed to equip ourselves. Alex ended up with a blue shirt to go with his grey jacket and a pair of black trousers. I found some jeans that fitted tolerably well and a rather nice imitation leather jacket which, being a man's jacket, buttoned up the wrong way. It did have an inside pocket made for mobile phones so I shoved the one I'd taken in there. I couldn't find a shirt small enough but there was a thin, fawn sweater which was OK. Inevitably we both ended up with trainers and no socks. Our yellow shorts would have to

do for the time being as underwear although Alex took the opportunity to get rid of his filthy black t-shirt. I also grabbed a hessian bag with a picture of a cute dog on the side.

“What do you want that for?” asked Alex.

“We're going to have to carry something, sooner or later,” I said. “We can't exist for long with just what we're wearing.”

“Good point,” he said and picked up a brief case. He opened it and found there was a hole in the bottom so he let it drop. “Maybe somewhere else. Where to now? It's probably too soon to go to the bridge.”

“Let's see if we can find a supermarket,” I said. “I've heard that they chuck out a lot of food that's gone out of date. If we can find one we can come back later after it's closed and see if there's anything we can acquire.”

“Ahh, hence the bag,” he said. “Good thinking. Do you fancy a coffee?”

“I could murder for a coffee,” I said, “but we've no coffee or kettle to make one.”

“True,” he said, “but there's a cafe over there that's opening up and we've got that phone. We might be able to pay for some coffees before they report the phone missing.”

I looked at him for a few moments then moved further down the street so we were away from the op shop. Such shops rarely open early but there were cars passing along the street and someone might report us if we lingered too long. I took the phone out of my jacket pocket and powered it up. There was no fingerprint check and no demand for an ID code. The phone must have been at least two years old. I quickly thumbed through the apps and, unsurprisingly, there was the standard payment app. I opened it and it seemed to work. At least it wasn't reporting no funds available as mine had sometimes done.

“Is it worth the risk?” I asked myself, looking over at the cafe. I hadn't

had a coffee since the morning of my arrest and the desire, now Alex had planted the seed, was growing stronger by the second. I agonised for some time because, although it was normal procedure for the system receiving funds to presume that the phone sending funds had the full authority of the user to do so, I had been out of circulation for a couple of months and things might have changed.

"I'm out of touch," I said to Alex. "If I use this phone to pay for coffees, will the cafe do any checks or will they just accept the phone's payment without checks?"

"I don't think they check," said Alex. "I was always just waving my phone before it was taken away. I don't remember any checks."

"Oh sod it," I said, my desire for a strong hot coffee reaching impossible levels. "And if it works we can go to a supermarket and get some stuff like soap and tampons."

"Well, there's that," said Alex. "There are four of you after all. Some toilet paper would be nice too. Oh and some clag and razors."

"Come on then," I said and marched across the road and down the street.

"Two cappuccinos, one skinny," I said to the young girl at the order counter. "For takeaway."

"Sure," she said pushing buttons on her register. "Do you want anything with that?"

The image of a muffin popped into my head. "And two muffins," I said. "Blueberry."

"Sure," she said. "A hundred and ten yawns."

I opened the payment app and waved it at her machine.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking at the display of her register. "Your image doesn't match that of the authorised user."

Chapter Thirteen

“Bugger,” I thought as a shaft of ice sliced through my bowels.

“Umm, it's my sister's phone,” I said, improvising rapidly and glancing at Alex. “Is that a problem?”

“Where's your sister?” asked the girl.

“She's at home,” I said.

“Sorry,” said the girl. “The authorised user has to be present.” She looked at Alex as if expecting him to pay instead. He just raised an eyebrow at her. “Maybe I should get the manager,” she added, looking to one side uncertainly.

I had a split second or two to wonder how a genuine person would react in this situation and decided on mild outrage.

“Oh forget it,” I said angrily. “I'm sick of all these frigging security systems, it's just a couple of coffees after all. Come on, Al-legro, let's go somewhere else.”

“Umm, if you could hold on a moment,” said the girl worriedly as we turned to go. She was staring at her display again. “I'll get the manager. There's a problem here.”

“Too late,” I said and marched out the door, Alex close behind me.

“This way,” I said and walked back the way we'd come.

As soon as we were past the window of the cafe I started to run. We went round a corner, up an alleyway and across a car park and into another street before slowing to a walk.

“Allegro?” asked Alex when he caught up.

“I started to say Alex then changed my mind,” I said. “It was all I could think of starting with Al.”

“Albert,” he said. “Alfred, Alfonso.”

“Yeah, all great names,” I said, “just didn't think of them. My mind went blank.”

“Hmm,” he said, “so why were we running?”

“I'm not sure,” I said, “but I think the system matched my face so it told her to detain us. The police will probably be along in a few minutes. It might have picked up yours as well. I didn't see a camera.”

“It was probably built into the checkout,” he said. “So we've been identified?”

“It's not like they don't know we're in the area,” I said, “although we may have just confirmed it for them. We're going to have to get some of that stuff Clark was talking about unless you know a plastic surgeon who'll work for nothing.”

“I do know one,” said Alex, “but she won't work for nothing.”

“Wow,” I said, studying his face. “What have you had done?”

He tapped his nose. “It used to be bigger,” he said.

“They did a good job,” I said. “It looks perfectly normal to me.”

“Thanks,” said Alex. “So what do we do now?”

“We keep walking,” I said, “and try to find somewhere to get some clag and makeup and stuff. A razor for you and the other guys too.”

“The only place I can think of which would have all that is a supermarket,” he said.

“It'll probably have better security than a cafe,” I pointed out.

“Yeah,” he said thoughtfully, “but we know now so we can use misdirection.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Let's find a supermarket,” he said. “Then we'll figure something out.”

* * *

It took a surprisingly long time to find a supermarket as we were reluctant to stop a passerby and ask. By the time we did the traffic was quite busy and a fair number of people were on the streets. We came across another surveillance robot, or possibly the same one again, but were able to keep other people between it and ourselves. We had a moment's panic when a police siren suddenly went off and a police car screamed past but it was pulling over a driver. We crossed the road so we didn't get too close and spotted a supermarket down a side road. It turned out that the side road ran alongside the supermarket car park and the supermarket itself fronted onto the main road in the centre of town. Off in the distance we could see the bridge.

There was a butcher's shop, a bakery and a newsagent in the supermarket foyer and a corridor that led to the public toilets and the fire exit. I don't know why we still call them newsagents since all news now came via the net but that's probably down to social inertia. Like 'clockwise' is now meaningless since all clocks are digital. “Or inching along,” I mused to myself, “when we haven't used inches for decades.”

“This will do nicely,” said Alex after we'd investigated the foyer.

“You have a plan?” I asked, hoping he had as nothing was coming to my mind.

“Yes,” he said, grinning at me. “But first I need a rubbish bin.”

“I think there's one outside,” I said so we walked back out into the sunshine. The car park was perhaps a quarter full and people were beginning to mill about.

“Sweet,” he muttered, peering into the bin. He pulled out a screwed up piece of paper that someone had used for a shopping list.

“You want to share?” I asked.

“We're going to do some play acting,” he said. “We'll go in and get what we need then go over near the checkouts. We need to be close enough so the person supervising can hear us. When I give you the signal you say quite loudly that you're going to the toilet then go out and head for the toilet. Can you manage that?”

“I think so,” I said. “I could use a visit to the toilet anyway.”

“Whatever you do, don't go in,” he said. “Once you've gone I'll look at this shopping list, realise I need to ask you something about it and call after you. Take no notice and head for the fire exit.”

“OK,” I said slowly. “How does this help us get away with not paying?”

“The person at the checkout should hear this,” he said, “so I'll run out after you and tell him or her I need to check something with you. He or she will be taken by surprise but these things happen and it'll be a few minutes before they realise I haven't come back. By then we'll be out the fire exit and heading off down the street. It'll be picked up on the cameras but it'll be too late. The important thing is to look natural and open. The moment we look furtive we'll become suspicious.”

“Can I use the toilet first?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “The person at the checkout might notice you coming out of the toilet and wonder why you're going back so soon.”

“Let's hope there isn't too much running, then,” I said. “Right, let's do it.”

After collecting a few items I headed off to the toilet on command and a minute or so later Alex came hurrying after me calling “Mary, Mary,” and waving his shopping list with the shopping basket in his other hand. We bundled the few items into the bag I'd fortuitously picked up at the op shop and slipped out of the fire escape into the side car park.

“Oi,” said one of the security guards in surprise. There were two of them loitering there. One male, one female and both fairly young. “This ain't no exit. Go back in and come out the proper way.”

“Sorry,” said Alex calmly. “Only our car is just over there.” He pointed to the one and only car in this part of the car park and both guards automatically looked at it.

“Should have thought of that when you parked, mate,” said the guard brusquely. He straightened up and tried to hide his cigarette behind his back.

“I know,” said Alex placatingly, “and next time we will. It's just that if anyone stops us and asks why we're coming in through the fire exit I'll have to tell them the security man with the cigarette told us to. Is that your ID number on your shoulder? 412?”

The lad glowered at him then glanced at the girl who'd already dropped her cigarette on the ground.

“Go on then,” he said, jerking his head towards the car.

“Thank you,” said Alex, beaming at them.

“You there, Shaz?” crackled the girl's radio.

“Yeah,” she replied to her lapel mike. “Wassup?”

“Need someone to check the women's toilet,” crackled the radio, “possible shoplifting in progress. Looking for a scruffy woman in jeans and leather jacket. Check to see if she's in there and report back.”

“Will do,” she replied, eyeing me with suspicion.

“Enjoy your cigarettes,” said Alex, pointedly.

“What you reckon, Will?” she asked her companion.

“Super said to check the toilet,” said Will, dropping his cigarette and grinding it with his heel. “Didn't say nothing 'bout people outside the fire exit.”

“Good point,” said Shaz. “Better do what I'm told then.” She hesitated as if waiting for something.

"I didn't see anyone when we came through the fire exit," said Alex, looking at me. "Did you?"

"Oh, no," I said, "completely deserted."

Will and Shaz nodded and disappeared through the fire exit door and we quickly hurried away.

"I'm surprised there wasn't a security camera monitoring the fire exit," I said as we moved out of the car park and onto the main street.

"There probably is," said Alex, "but it might not be working which is how they knew it was safe to have an illicit smoke there. Shall we head to the bridge now?"

"I need a toilet first," I said. "All this excitement is getting to me."

* * *

As luck would have it there was a park beside the bridge. It ran along the river bank and was called, according to the large sign, "Tench Recreation Reserve". Dogs were welcome but overnight campers were not. The grass was neatly tended and there were benches dotted around and three or four covered barbecue areas. Perhaps more importantly there was a toilet block at the bottom of the footpath that led down from the bridge. It even had toilet paper. When I emerged Alex waved at me from the closest barbecue area and I could see that Ginny and Itch were with him. Neither of them were wearing a yellow jumpsuit.

"Hey," I said, joining them. "You found some clothes then?"

Both were wearing blue slacks and matching blue shirts with Penrith Animal Hospital embroidered on the breast pocket.

"We found a laundry parcel on the doorstep of a vet's," said Ginny. "It was either these or white lab coats. We got the thongs from outside a pharmacy."

"They look fine," I said. "What's that?"

“We came across the Tourist Information Office,” said Itch, “so I asked if they had any maps of the area. I thought a map would be useful.”

“Absolutely,” I said, grabbing the proffered map. “Although I’m surprised they did. I would have thought all maps are on the net now.”

“That’s what the lady said,” said Itch, “but I told her my phone had died and she found an old hard copy for me. She was very helpful.”

I unfolded the map and spread it out on the table then whistled delightedly.

“Look,” I said and the others bent to look. “This is Penrith but look at these! We’re surrounded by National Parks. Penrith is on the edge of the Blue Mountains National Park and there’s Wollemi National Park to the north and Kanangra-Boyd and Nattai National Parks to the south. There’s got to be thousands, maybe tens of thousands of square kilometres of uninhabited woodlands. Ohh, and see that? Lake Burragarang. It’s huge!”

“So we’re going to spend the rest of our lives living in a National Park?” asked Ginny unenthusiastically.

“I hope not,” I said, studying the map, “but it’ll do for the time being. If we can disappear into this lot we can relax and think about the long term while the Chinese are looking for us. They’ll give up eventually. And we’re not that far from Sydney. When the time is right we can go there and disappear.”

“When will the time be right?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but maybe in a month or two. It depends what we decide to do.”

She nodded unhappily.

“Hey, at least summer is coming,” said Alex. “It’ll be like a camping holiday.”

Ginny didn't look reassured so I asked them if they'd managed to find any food.

"Yes," said Itch. "We had breakfast at a cafe. Bacon and egg rolls and coffee."

"How did you pay for it?" I asked in surprise.

Itch looked at Ginny who was staring at the map.

"It was Ginny," she said. "She went into the cafe and told the man she'd lost her phone and was very hungry. She asked if he had any stale leftovers he could spare her. He said he'd give her a cooked breakfast if she would have dinner with him."

"Are you going to have dinner with him?" I asked.

"No," said Ginny. "He changed his mind when I asked if my friend could join us."

"But he still gave you breakfast?" asked Alex, as intrigued as I was.

"He though Itch was Chinese and he was going to get into trouble," she said. "I think he was glad to see the back of us. What about you?"

"We found a leftover barbecue," said Alex.

"That is good," said Itch. "Do you want some camping equipment?"

"Don't tell me he kitted you out with a tent as well?" I said in astonishment. "Jesus, he must have been scared."

"No," said Itch, a frown crossing her face. "I thought we might end up camping in the bush so when we came upon a camping and outdoors store we went in to check their security."

"And ...?" I asked.

"I have the security code for the delivery entrance," she said.

“They thought you were Chinese as well?” asked Alex.

“No,” said Ginny. “We were looking at some sleeping bags when Itch noticed a delivery van pull up at the back. The man behind the counter went out and had to use a code to get back in.”

“I did not see the code he entered,” said Itch, “but I saw his hand movements. He pressed top then bottom then middle twice all in the same column. So the code must be either 7144, 8255 or 9366.”

I thought about that while visualising a keypad then nodded. It made sense.

“Just one problem though,” I said. “We don't have any transport, unless we take rucksacks and carry everything. We won't be able to get far though.”

“We have transport,” said Ginny. “Wayne stole a van.”

“Oh for god's sake,” I said, rapping my hand on the table. “Why didn't you tell me that straight off?”

“You wanted to talk about clothes,” said Itch.

“Yes, but ...,” I started then gave up. “So where is Wayne?”

“He's gone to get rid of the air conditioning equipment that was inside,” said Itch. “He seems a resourceful man.”

“Well, he was arrested for breaking and entering,” said Ginny. “I would think he knows about these things.”

“This changes things,” I said, thinking. “If we have transport we can go really deep into the bush. Does Wayne know about the camping store?”

“No,” said Itch. “I did not tell him. When we arrived he was waiting beside the bridge and went almost straight away. He said not to leave until he came back.”

“We weren't planning to,” I said. “Any sign of Marcie and Clark?”

“No,” said Itch. “But we have not been here long.”

A police car sped across the bridge, its siren blaring. We all turned to watch but it continued down the main road and made no attempt to turn off to the recreation reserve.

“I hope they're here soon,” I said. “We got some clag but I want Clark to show us how to use it.”

* * *

Judging by the sun it was an hour or more before Wayne turned up. He strode across the grass in a pair of overalls and work boots looking as though he had every right to be there.

“Awesome,” he said, joining us. “Any sign of the other two?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “Itch says you've got us a van?”

“Sure thing,” he said happily, “and more than that. Anyone hungry?”

“We've all found some food,” I said, “although we've nothing to be going on with.”

“Sorted,” he said and beamed. “Did Itch tell you I got a van full of air-con equipment?”

“Yes,” I said.

“It's only a two seater,” he said, “and with all that in the back there was no room for the rest of youse so I offloaded it all to a builder I found. He bought me a full tank of diesel and a load of food.”

“Impressive,” I said. “What sort of food?”

“Four smoked hams, a load of canned veggies, a couple of sacks of rice and a big tin of coffee,” said Wayne. “Also a couple of towels, some soap, hairbrushes, toothpaste and toothbrushes, and a few other

odds and ends. I been married three times, I know what you ladies need. It's all in the back of the van.”

“Do you think he'll keep quiet?” I asked, surprised at the amount of food he'd got. “Didn't he ask any questions?”

“Shit no,” said Wayne. “It cost him around 2500 yawns but he got at least a hundred thousand yawns worth of stuff, including a complete ready to install air-con unit and a bunch of tools. For that kind of deal you don't ask no questions. 'Sides, he'll be up for receiving if he tells anyone.”

“So it's an old van?” asked Alex. “Not electric?”

“Diesel, like I said,” said Wayne. “VW Transporter, 2024 model, not one of yer pieces of Chinese crap. Only 290 thou on the clock.”

“So that means there'll be no fingerprinting or biometrics,” I said thoughtfully. “What about the rego?”

“I muddled up the plates,” said Wayne. “Obviously if we get stopped they'll spot it but otherwise it's just another old van. It's parked in a side street back that way.”

“How long do you think a tank of fuel will last?” I asked.

“Dunno,” he said, “but its got a big tank. Put in 60 litres and there was already a quarter tank there. Should be good for a thousand K at least. Why? Where do you want to go?”

“Itch got us a map,” I said, showing him. “If we go a hundred or so K into these National Parks we should be well and truly hidden but we'll still have plenty of fuel to get us around for supplies.”

“We're going to need tents and stuff,” he said, looking at the map. “Can't sleep all seven in the van and we'll be getting rain and shit.”

“Yes,” I said. “But I've got a plan.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Isn't that Marcie?” said Ginny, a while later. She pointed to a figure running along the river bank some way off.

She had listened to my plan to raid the camping store but not taken part in the discussion. I was getting the distinct impression that she'd do what she was told to do but didn't have much in the way of initiative.

“Difficult to tell from this distance,” said Alex, standing up to get a better view. “Although it's certainly not a jogger. She looks distressed whoever she is.”

The figure was running in spurts then slowing to a walk then running again and stumbling, all the while looking around in an agitated way. Once the figure fell over but got up quickly and started running again.

“Should we offer help?” asked Itch, also standing up.

“Best not to get involved if it isn't Marcie,” I said, standing up too. “The last thing we want to do is get caught in some domestic issue and have the police turn up.”

“You know, I think it is Marcie,” said Alex. “But there's no sign of Clark. Maybe something's happened to him.”

“Alex, jog down and get a better look,” I said. “If it isn't Marcie just jog past then come back but if it is, bring her back here. The rest of you, see if you can spot Clark.”

Alex jogged in the direction of the figure then suddenly started sprinting. It must have been Marcie since, when she saw him, she speeded up to meet him then started jabbing backwards with one hand. Alex grabbed her and they stayed like that for a few moments before they both started hurrying back to where we were.

“Shit,” I said. “Clark's in trouble, can't be anything else. Wayne, where's the van?”

"Three streets down," he said, pointing. "McIvor Street."

"Go and get it," I said. "Either we're going to have to go find Clark or get out of here bloody quickly. Bring it to the parking area by the toilets over there and stay with it."

"Yes, boss," he said and hurried away.

It was clearly Marcie now and, equally clearly, she was highly agitated and fighting tears. Alex was helping her along with an arm around her shoulders, trying to provide some comfort although the look on his face showed there was definitely a problem.

"Come on," I said to Ginny and Itch and we hurried to join them.

"Oh Nat, thank god," exclaimed Marcie when she saw us. She lurched forward and grabbed me in a hug. She was panting heavily and trying to speak and cry at the same time.

"Clark's been arrested," said Alex. "He's somewhere over there but I'm not sure where," and he waved his arm in the direction Marcie had come from.

"... police ...," gasped Marcie, "... computer ... got away ... bridge ..."

"Come on, sit down," I said, unpeeling her arms from around me. "The rest of you as well. Try to look like we're just chatting."

I managed to get Marcie onto the ground and made her take deep breaths while the others organised themselves. They were looking worried.

"Don't try to talk," I said. "There's nothing we can do at this moment. Calm yourself and explain what happened then we can try to ..."

She jumped up and I had to drag her back down to the ground.

"Just chill," I said. "Panicking won't get us anywhere. That goes for you guys as well," I added, seeing the agitation in their body language.

"We've got to do something," exclaimed Ginny and Itch and Alex nodded in agreement.

"And we will," I said. "I've already sent Wayne for the van but we need Marcie to calm down and explain what's happened."

It took a minute or two and when she did explain it was a little disjoint but it would be unreasonable to expect a planned presentation. The gist of it was that Marcie and Clark had found some food and clothes then come across a computer shop. Clark had insisted on going in to steal a laptop and had, in the process, been caught. Marcie, waiting across the street, had waited for a long time and was getting worried when a police car pulled up and two police went inside. She'd known instantly that it was about Clark and had moved further down the street where she could see without being obvious. The police had come back out with Clark in handcuffs and bundled him into the police car. They had driven off and Marcie, panicking, had run after them. Obviously the car had left her behind very quickly but she'd seen it turn right further up the street and, when she'd reached that corner, she'd found there was a police station about half way down. She'd hurried down to the police station but there were several police cars there and no sign of Clark. She'd loitered for a while in the street outside the police station in the hope of seeing some sign of Clark and desperately hoping he'd just walk out the door. Finally, unable to think of anything else to do, she'd made her way to the bridge.

Except none of us were there. She'd hung around for quite a while, getting ever more stressed until it occurred to her that there might be more than one bridge. She'd asked a young woman with a pram and then run all the way upriver to this bridge.

"Can you find the police station again?" I asked.

"I think so," she said. "I'm pretty sure where the computer shop was, though. It's in the same road as Coles."

"Anyone know where Coles is?" I asked.

Alex didn't, since he and I had been to Woolworth's but Itch and

Ginny had seen it and thought they knew how to get there from here.

“Great,” I said. “Let’s get over to the van.”

I was impressed to see that Wayne had brought the van over and parked it facing the road so it was ready to go. The side sliding door was open and he was leaning against the van looking nonchalant but keeping an eye on us. We went over and I made Marcie get into the passenger seat so she could give Wayne directions. For some reason I felt as though this was Wayne’s van and that he should drive. He must have picked up on that as, after a quick glance at me, he got in the driver’s seat. The rest of us climbed in the back and sat on the metal floor, bracing ourselves as best we could. Wayne’s shopping was down at the far end and would be a useful cushion if he accelerated hard and we slid. Sadly there were ridges running the length of the floor in the back and they were painful to sit on. They were even more painful to slide across as I discovered very quickly.

We managed to find Coles without too much difficulty and Marcie pointed out the computer shop. In the back, however, we couldn’t see much as there were no side windows to the van and every little movement of the van caused us to skate around in the back. Holding on to the back of the seats helped but not a huge amount. Fortunately the rifle was wedged under the driver’s seat so wasn’t likely to go off accidentally.

“I think the police station is down that road,” said Marcie and those of us in the back lurched heavily to the left as Wayne turned right.

“No, it isn’t,” he said after a few moments and turned left unexpectedly so we all crashed to the right.

He came to a sudden stop, probably at a junction, and the shopping pushed us into the backs of the seats.

“There it is!” screamed Marcie and we slid over to the left as Wayne turned right.

“Find somewhere to park where we can see the entrance,” I called from the well of the sliding door.

“Will do,” he said and almost immediately braked then started reversing into a parking space.

Alex and Itch pushed the shopping back to the end of the van while I extricated myself from underneath Ginny. My knees hurt from all the sliding and my shoulder, which had been wrenched a few times the night before, had been wrenched yet again and was throbbing. I found the catch for the sliding door and slid it open. Thankfully, the four of us in the back climbed out. We were parked outside a small dimly lit Asian grocery which didn't look too prosperous. Next door was a gutted Print & Copy shop with a To Let sign in the large window. Across the road and a little further up was the police station, a two story brick building with a small car park in front of it and a side driveway which probably led to a bigger car park.

“Awesome,” I said, taking all this in. I leaned back into the van. “Can you get us inside that place?” I asked Wayne quietly, pointing to the Print & Copy shop.

“Looks gutted,” he said, peering through the windscreen. “Probably no security, not much point for an empty shop in front of a police station. Shouldn't be too much of a problem. Why?”

“Six of us standing round a van is obvious,” I said. “If we're inside the shop people will assume we're thinking of renting it.”

“Good plan,” he said and heaved his bulk out of the van with the complete lack of concern for passing traffic of the experienced tradie. He came round the passenger side and rummaged in the glove box for a pallet knife.

“What are we doing?” asked Itch.

“Going inside this shop,” I said, “so we can watch the police station better.”

“Ahh,” she said and thought about that. “Why?”

“So we can try to see if Clark is inside,” I said, “and if he comes out.”

“Ahh,” she said and looked over at the police station.

“There you go,” said Wayne as the shop door clicked and slid open. “Don't see any alarm box inside.”

“Who'd want to rob a Print & Copy shop?” I asked. “It's just paper and stuff isn't it?”

“Expensive printers,” he said, going in, “cept no use to anyone but another Printer. Anyway, there's nothing here.”

I followed him in and the others trooped in as well.

“OK, everyone,” I said. “Look as though we're thinking of renting this place.”

Alex and Marcie immediately started to point at things and Ginny went over to talk to Wayne.

“Where's Itch?” I asked.

“I think she went across the road,” said Alex.

“What?” I exclaimed and turned to look out the window. Sure enough, Itch was on the other side of the road, walking towards the police station. “What the hell is she doing?”

“I thought you sent her,” said Alex.

“No, I told her we were going in here so we could watch,” I said, watching Itch. The others gathered around the window to watch as well. “Oh no. Oh no, no, no.”

Itch had calmly turned into the driveway of the police station and was walking round the back.

“Wayne, you'd better get back in the van and be ready for a quick getaway,” I said. “I have bad feelings about this.”

Wayne grimaced and went back to the van.

“What about us?” asked Ginny.

“Stay here,” I said, watching the police station, “but be ready to run to the van.”

No one made any attempt to pretend to inspect the shop. We all just stood there watching the police station. Even Wayne was watching from inside the van. Several people walked past but only one was sufficiently curious to glance inside. He didn't react and just carried on walking.

“Oh come on, Itch,” I muttered to myself in an agony of suspense.

An older woman with several shopping bags and a small dog on a leash stopped at the back end of the van and I glanced over to see why. The dog was having a pee against the back wheel. She saw me watching and shrugged indifferently then looked down at the dog until it had finished.

“There she is,” said Marcie, suddenly and pointed to the far end of the police station.

Itch came striding around the corner and marched along the small car park at the front, past the three cars parked there then stepped back onto the pavement. She walked down until she was almost level with us then stopped to check for traffic. When it was clear she walked across the road and went behind the van towards the Asian grocery then turned and came up to the Print & Copy shop.

“What the hell were you doing?” I demanded as she walked in.

“I went to see if Clark was there,” she said. “I walked around the building looking in the windows.”

“And what if someone saw you nosing around?” I said angrily.

“They would assume I was a Party official,” she said. “The blue of these clothes is similar to that of the uniforms of Party officials. No Australian policeman would risk challenging me.”

I looked at her but kept my mouth shut. She could well have been right. Certainly Wu Wei Qi had always worn a blue suit and, I remembered distastefully, so had the three men who'd interrogated me although I hadn't thought anything of it at the time.

"Fortunately I found him on the first floor," said Itch. "I could not go inside in case there were Chinese in there."

"He's there?" I asked. "Where?"

"The third room from the right, at the back," said Itch.

"Right," I said as Wayne came back in.

"He's in there," I said. "Itch saw him through a window. How the hell are we going to get him out? We can't storm a police station."

"Were there bars on the window?" asked Wayne.

"Yes," said Itch.

"Bugger," said Wayne scowling. "We've got no metal cutting tools. I suppose we could put a rope around the bars and try to pull them out with the van but we've got no rope neither."

"It's round the back as well," I said. "We'd get trapped in their car park."

"Bugger," said Wayne again, with feeling. "Don't suppose we could just leave him there?"

"No way!" I said forcefully. "I will not under any circumstances abandon him or any of you. We're all in this together, whatever happens."

"Only asking," he said. "Keep yer hair on."

"Don't even think about it," I said glaring. I jabbed my finger into his chest to emphasise my point.

“OK, OK,” he said, stepping back.

“OK,” I said. “Think of something better.”

“Um, there's an army car coming,” said Alex.

I turned to look out the window again just as the army car pulled into the police station drive.

“What's going on?” I asked, rhetorically.

The car stopped and two soldiers got out. One looked like an officer and the other had a rifle. They both went inside the building. The driver of the car turned the car around and waited. A couple of minutes later the soldiers reappeared with Clark between them, the rifle pointed at him. He wasn't wearing his glasses and he had blood on his face. He didn't seem to be walking steadily and I hoped it was because of his lack of glasses.

“Everyone, back in the van,” I shouted as the soldier pushed Clark into the back seat. I saw his head bang nastily against the edge of the roof of the car before the door was slammed shut. We ran out of the shop and piled into the van. I slammed the sliding door shut just as the car pulled out of the driveway.

“Follow them,” I shouted at Wayne as I jumped in the front seat.

He started the engine and we drove off, some distance behind the car. Fortunately, being an army vehicle, it was camouflaged and so stood out from the rest of the traffic. It drove up to the next junction, turned left then left again and headed back past Coles. It kept to the speed limit and showed no sign of trying to evade us but then, why would it? We were just an ordinary dirty white van on moderately busy streets. A few minutes later it was crossing the bridge where we'd met up and a couple of minutes later turned right into the Air Force Base we'd so precipitously vacated only the night before.

“Pull up over there,” I hissed to Wayne, as though the soldiers might be able to hear us. “Pretend to be inspecting the wheels.”

Obediently Wayne pulled over and jumped out and squatted to inspect the rear wheel. I leaned over the driver's seat and saw the car go behind a building. It didn't come out the other side so presumably it had stopped.

"Come back," I called to Wayne so he stood up and gave the tyre a kick then climbed back in.

"Drive on," I said, peering around him, "and pull over when we're out of sight of the Base."

"There's a road up there, to the left," he said. "Looks like it goes into an estate."

"Take it," I said, "and park somewhere."

He went round the corner and pulled up on a bare patch beside the road. The road itself curved around to the right, away from the Base.

"Everyone stay here," I commanded and jumped out of the van.

I hurried back to the highway and dashed across to the trees on the other side. Hidden amongst the trees, I could see the buildings on the Base and realised that these were the trees Itch had run through to create a diversion. I could also see the car we'd followed and deduced that it was parked outside the barrack room we'd escaped from. It made sense. We'd escaped from there so as and when we were recaptured we'd be taken back there. After all, we were still destined for the Project and that's where the truck to take us would pick us up from. I squatted and watched for a few minutes but nothing happened, other than someone coming out of the barrack room and driving the car over to the main car park. He, I assumed it was a he, then got out and went into the big two story building. I figured Clark had been taken into the barrack room already and wasn't being left inside the car unguarded. What to do about it was the problem.

"He's in the room we escaped from," I said when I got back to the van. "We know where he is and we know he's alive. We also have an idea of the layout and we know an escape can be made since we've already done it. What I don't know is how many guards there are now

or whether any more prisoners have been put in there.”

“It's a safe bet there'll be more guards than there were,” said Alex. “Shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. It's human nature.”

“You're probably right,” I said. “There's another building next to it. That was where the guards lived?”

“Yeah,” said Wayne. “Only those two buildings were for us. The rest of the place is the Aussie Air Force.”

“I was only in there a short time,” I said. “It looks like it's made of wood?”

“Yup,” said Wayne. “Good old Aussie hardwood. They both are.”

“OK,” I said thoughtfully. “Does anyone have any matches?”

“No,” said Alex.

“In one of the bags,” said Wayne. “I got four big boxes, just in case.”

“Awesome,” I said. “Ginny, could you find them for me?”

“Sure,” she said and started rummaging through the bags.

“So what is your plan?” asked Itch.

For some reason it irked me that she always assumed I had a plan.

“I'll tell you in a minute,” I said, hoping I'd have more than a vague idea by then. “Wayne, can you actually shoot that rifle you're carrying?”

“Dunno,” he said. “I haven't checked it's charged.”

“Well, check it then,” I said.

He pulled it out from under the seat and fiddled with it for a few

moments. Then there was a sudden quiet whine and the screen on top lit up faintly.

“98%,” he said.

“So you reckon you can shoot it?” I asked.

He poked it a couple of times and a piece of it fell off. He caught it and peered inside.

“No problem,” he said. “The magazine’s full.”

He rammed the magazine back into place and slapped it.

“Great,” I said. “Anyone think they’re a better shot than Wayne?”

No one did.

“I found the matches,” said Ginny and handed me a box.

“Right,” I said. “Wayne, Itch, come with me. The rest of you stay here and pray we don’t get caught.”

Chapter Fifteen

We squatted among the trees, studying the Base. In full daylight it looked even more exposed than it had the evening before.

“We have one advantage,” I said slowly, trying to reassure myself as well as Itch and Wayne. “I doubt the Chinese will be expecting a breakout so soon. They’ll probably think we’ll come after dark, if at all.”

“They won’t have had time to repair the window, neither,” said Wayne, “or put bars on the others. Most likely they’ve only put a board over it. May not have even done that yet.”

“Good point,” I said. “You see that other building? To the left of where we were? We should be able to get to it unseen so what if we set fire to it as a distraction then went in the washroom window to get Clark when they run to put out the fire?”

“Not good,” said Itch. “This is a Royal Australian Air Base. I suspect the Chinese will only have jurisdiction over the two buildings assigned to them and will not help with fires elsewhere.”

“I didn’t think of that,” I said ruefully.

“Which could work in our favour,” said Wayne, “if the Base has its own fire unit. They probably won’t help with a fire in the Chinese block.”

“So what you’re saying is that we have to set fire to one of the two Chinese buildings,” I said. “It’ll be more difficult to get to them unseen.”

“We could go around through the trees and past that other building,” said Itch. “That way we would be only a short distance across open ground to the prisoner building.”

“Yes, that could work,” I said. “It’s only maybe ten metres rather than the fifty or so across the car park. OK. Itch, could you get onto the roof of the guard building?”

“Certainly,” said Itch. “There are drainpipes.”

“Great,” I said. “How’s this? We go around that way, past the other building and collect some kindling and leaves on the way. Itch climbs onto the guard building roof and starts a fire and Wayne and I go in through the washroom and get Clark.”

“No,” said Wayne. “That won’t work. I got stuck in that window when we escaped and it took three of you to pull me through. You won’t be able to push me in then pull me back out again, not even with Clark helping and he may not be able to. You saw he could barely walk. There may be a guard or two in the washroom as well so we’d be sitting targets.”

“It would be better to go in through the door,” said Itch. “If we have to carry Clark out it will be much easier.”

“This is becoming more difficult than I thought,” I said, feeling frustrated. “OK, how about this? Itch, you start a fire around the doorway of the guard building, rather than on the roof. That way they won’t be able to get out for a while. Me and Wayne can then go through the door of the prisoner building and get Clark then all of us can make a break for it across the car park.”

“What if Wayne starts the fire,” said Itch, “and I get onto the roof of the prisoner building and pull off some of the sheeting? You can come in through the door. That way we’ll be attacking on two fronts.”

“No, I don’t like that,” I said. “You may not be able to get any of the sheeting lose and we need Wayne in case Clark has to be carried.”

“True,” said Itch.

“I ain’t sure I can run across the car park carrying Clark,” said Wayne. “It was hard enough last time.”

“Yeah” I said, “I remember, and it was dark. I don’t see how we’re going to be able to get away. Even with a fire they’re going to be able to shoot at us through the windows.”

We contemplated the target for a while, trying to work out possible solutions. I was conscious that we were up against soldiers who had undoubtedly already considered likely attack scenarios and devised counter attacks.

"I have another idea," I said. "We go in and start the fire as before but we get one of the others to drive the van in as fast as possible when they see the fire. We get Clark out, shove him in the van and disappear at high speed."

"That might work," said Wayne. "Sure as hell I can carry that little prick to the car park."

"Could we use some fuel from the van to start the fire?" asked Itch.

"Nah," said Wayne. "It's diesel, not petrol. You want me to go back and get the van?"

"No," I said. "I want you leading the attack. You're twice the size of the Chinese which might frighten them a bit. I may need you to break down a door or something as well."

"Fair enough," he said.

"I will go," said Itch. "You are needed here to control the operation, Nat. Who should drive the van? I am not a skilled driver."

"Probably Alex," I said. "Ginny will be too scared and I don't know if Marcie can drive."

"How will we know when the van is in position?" asked Wayne.

"I don't think it will matter," I said. "Once the fire is started it will burn for a while and keep the Chinese occupied. It'll probably take longer for you and me to get to the buildings and start the fire anyway. The only real problem I can see is if there are guards inside with Clark."

"Or if Clark is elsewhere," said Itch.

“Oh, that's a happy thought,” I said. “Sod it, we have to assume he's in there. If he isn't it could take us days to reconnoitre the whole Base.”

“Also,” said Itch, “do you want Marcie and Ginny to stay where we left them or come in the van as well?”

“Now that's a good question,” I said. “Hmm. If they come with the van they won't be able to help as we only have the one gun and they'll be at risk as well. On the other hand if they stay behind it'll slow our escape down having to go back and collect them. No, I think they'd better come too.”

“As you say,” said Itch. “Shall I go now?”

“Well, for better or worse we have a plan,” I said. “Sod it, let's do it.”

“Right,” said Itch and started to creep away.

“Wait,” I said as a thought occurred to me. “While Alex is driving the van get one of the others to use the map to find a route down to the lake. It'll save time and we'll be less likely to get lost.”

Itch nodded and disappeared into the undergrowth.

“I hope you've got the matches,” I said.

“Nope,” said Wayne. “I've got the gun. You've got the matches.”

“No, I haven't,” I said, beginning to panic. “I thought Ginny gave them to you.”

“They're in your pocket,” he said.

Desperately I started to pat my pockets then breathed a sigh of relief. I did have the matches after all.

“I can't take much more of this,” I said.

“Don't worry about it,” said Wayne. “Most likely we'll be recaptured in the next few minutes so you won't have to worry about it any more.”

"You're a bundle of fun, aren't you," I said. "Isn't it better to think positively?"

"Nah," he said. "I've always assumed the cops are going to catch me when I'm on a job. That way when something goes wrong I don't freeze in panic, and something always goes wrong."

"What can possibly go wrong here?" I asked sarcastically. "You and me against an unknown number of armed and trained soldiers."

"Yeah," he said. "So are we doing this or are we going to keep bullshitting?"

"We're doing it," I said. "Not like we've anything better to do."

I remembered to pick up an armful of twigs and stuffed a handful of dry leaves into one of the pockets of my jacket. They rustled but not loudly. Wayne turned on the gun and it whined for a few moments then a dark light on the screen came on, presumably saying it was ready to fire. We made our way through the trees then scurried across to the building that stood not far from our target buildings. I peered around the corner and quickly jerked back when I saw a guard. He was standing beside the building, looking towards the prisoner building and wasn't visible from our previous vantage point.

"Guard," I whispered into Wayne's ear and pointed round the corner. "Far end of the building."

Wayne cautiously peeped around then pulled back.

"Count to fifty," he whispered in my ear. "Then go out and say hello. I'll go round the other side and wallop him."

"OK," I said and started counting slowly.

Wayne crept off around the other side of the building. I counted to fifty then, just to be safe, counted ten more before stepping around the corner.

"Hello," I said, my voice squeaky with tension.

The guard jerked in surprise then whirled around, raising his gun at the same time.

“站,” he said, his voice seemingly as tense as mine. “来[?] [?]吧”

He raised his gun to his shoulder and started to advance towards me.

“I, um, was hoping we could talk about this,” I said, wondering where the hell Wayne had got to.”

“You! Hand high,” he said menacingly jerking the tip of his gun upwards.

“Sure, OK, anything you say,” I said in relief as Wayne tiptoed around the corner behind him.

The guard was about to say something else when the butt of Wayne's gun smashed into the nape of his neck, just below his helmet. He jerked forward with a surprised expression on his face and a sighing grunt.

“Shall we kill him?” whispered Wayne, looking around to see if anyone had seen.

I knew that he was the enemy and that I'd already killed a soldier but, frankly, I didn't have the stomach to do it in cold blood. Wayne probably didn't either which was why he was asking to be ordered to.

“No,” I whispered back. “But we'll take his gun.”

Wayne nodded and tossed me the gun he was holding. I dropped my armful of twigs then fumbled the gun and dropped that as well. While I was picking it up and retrieving the twigs, Wayne searched the soldier and found five magazines of bullets, pellets, projectiles or whatever they were called. He shoved them in the front pocket of his overalls then beckoned me over.

“It's on,” he whispered, “so if you need to use it, just point it and pull the trigger.”

“OK,” I whispered, wondering how much of a kick it had. My dad had let me fire his shotgun once when I was a kid and the recoil had knocked me over and bruised my shoulder. Maybe an electric gun didn't have a recoil.

“They've boarded up the window,” whispered Wayne, pointing to the window we'd broken when escaping.

I gave him a thumbs up and dashed across the gap to the prisoner building. Peering round the edge I couldn't see any guards so I went to the other corner and peered round there as well. Nothing.

“Stay here,” I whispered to Wayne. “I'm going to try to see inside.”

He nodded and raised his gun to give me protective cover in case I needed it. I wasn't a fan of war films but I had seen a few and knew some of the terminology. Protective cover had a nice safe ring to it.

I crept along the side of the building that was closest to the road since there was no one in that car park. The other side was visible to the big two story building in the centre of the Base. At the first window I very cautiously lifted my head and peered in. It was the washroom and looked empty. I dropped down again and crept to the next. This must have been inside the sleeping part as there was a guard standing with his back to a door. I dropped down instantly and hugged the side of the building for several seconds in case he'd seen a movement and came to the window.

He didn't so I looked back to Wayne and tapped the rifle to indicate a guard then held up one finger. He nodded and I hoped he understood my improvised code. At the next window I peeked even more cautiously as it would be more within the guard's field of view but I couldn't see anything. There seemed to be something blocking the window. The next window was also blocked so I made my way to the last. From below I could see it wasn't blocked so I peeked in and jerked down again instantly. There was another guard there. It looked like there was one at each end of the room. I tried to focus on my memory of the split second image but couldn't see anything that might have been Clark. There was nothing for it but to have another, longer, look.

I edged a little further along so that I was almost at the corner of the building then scraped my hair away from the left side of my head and around the back. Then I slowly edged over so just the corner of my left eye could see through the bottom corner of the window. I knew there was a guard there but I wanted to see further down the room. And there it was. A foot, roughly halfway down the length of the room on the same side as me. I couldn't see the rest of the owner of the foot but it was on the floor and had a trainer on it so it was unlikely to be a soldier.

I sank back down then tapped my gun again and raised one finger to show there was another guard then laid my gun across my knees and made circles around my eyes to indicate glasses. Then I pointed to the middle of the room and hoped Wayne would realise I was referring to Clark. He gave me a thumbs up so whatever he thought I meant was now fixed in his mind. I, very cautiously, peered around the corner of the building and saw something I hadn't seen the night before or during our inspection from the woods. The two buildings, the prisoner and the guard, were joined by a platform perhaps ten centimetres above the ground and roughly half the width of the buildings. Each building had a door that opened onto the platform. Actually, it made sense since in the rain the entrances would get very muddy but it made my life a little easier. I could stuff my leaves and twigs under the platform and get a fire going more easily than if the building was flush with the ground. On the other hand, no doubt because of our escape, there was no music or TV noise coming from the guard building, just a few quiet voices and the occasional clumping of boots on wooden floorboards.

I beckoned to Wayne and he made his way down the length of the building, keeping low so his head didn't show through a window.

"Two guards, one at each end," I whispered, putting my lips to his ear. It seemed sensible to clarify what I had tried to signal. "I think Clark is about halfway down, on this side."

He nodded.

Remembering that in the movies they use a lot of hand signals, I held up my bundle of twigs then pointed to myself then pointed around the

corner. He nodded again so I then pointed at him, then his gun then the prisoner room.

“Where's the door?” he whispered.

“Round the corner,” I whispered back. “Wait for my signal.”

He gave a thumbs up then we both froze as boots clumped on the wooden platform between the buildings. A door opened, it sounded like the prisoner door, then a command was barked. By the sound of it both the guards in the room had been ordered out. They went across the platform and the other door was opened. The new person followed and barked more commands. There was a pause then two guards went across and back into the prisoner room, slamming the guard door behind them.

“They've changed the guards,” I thought. “Bugger, that means the new ones won't be bored senseless yet.”

Another command was barked then the prisoner door was slammed and the new boots clumped away. Another set of boots made their way to the end of the room. After a few seconds everything went silent. More to the point, I hadn't heard the sound of a lock.

I counted to ten in my head just in case then another five but everything stayed quiet. With a lump in my throat I chanced a glance around the corner. There was no one there. I took a longer look. In the distance I could see someone walking back to the big building but, other than that, there was no one else. I dropped to my hands and knees and, with the gun in one hand and the bundle of twigs in the other, I scuttled across to the corner of the other building. Everything stayed quiet.

Carefully I put the gun down on the ground, within easy reach and pointing towards the prisoner building. Then I lay down and stuffed the leaves from my pocket as far under the platform as I could. Still no sounds, apart from a few quiet voices from inside. I got the box of matches out of my other pocket and had just extracted one when there was a loud thump right beside my head. I froze then there were more thumps, getting a little fainter. By the sound of it someone had got off

a bed or out of a chair right beside me and had walked down the room.

“Great,” I thought to myself and struck the match.

It sounded like a cruise ship crashing through a sea barrier but it flared nicely and I pushed it onto the leaves. For a moment nothing happened then they caught and started to burn. I waited a moment or two then started feeding in the twigs until there was a nice little blaze going and I prayed there was enough to keep the fire going until the floorboards caught.

They say a watched kettle never boils. Watching the floorboard, waiting for it to catch alight, I came to appreciate a new meaning to the concept of infinite time. As the twigs burnt away and the small flames from them began to drop down from the floorboard I could see that the floorboard above wasn't affected in the slightest.

“Oh shit, shit, shit,” I swore under my breath. Everything depended on setting fire to the wooden building and it wouldn't bloody well burn!

With absolutely no idea what to do next I looked over at Wayne. He was watching me expressionlessly. No doubt he could tell the building wasn't a raging conflagration. I shook my head and he bared his teeth in disappointment. I looked under the hut again, just in case the floorboards had been slow to catch but they hadn't. As far as I could tell they weren't even discoloured. A glint a little further along caught my eye and with a brain bereft of ideas I reached out with a hand. It was a small flat tin, still fairly shiny. I picked it up and looked at it. Even though it was covered in Chinese characters it was obvious what it was. Shoe polish.

“Boot polish, more likely,” I thought. “Someone must have dropped it out of the window.”

I tossed it back under the hut. Boot polish was no bloody use. I needed something flammable. Why couldn't someone have lost a bottle of alcohol rather than boot polish?

I heard Wayne hiss and glanced over at him. He was beckoning and

pointing towards the road. No doubt he was proposing we retreat and come up with a better plan. I nodded and that movement, I think, must have dislodged some long forgotten memory from the deepest recesses of my mind. Certainly, looking back, I can't think of any other reason why I remembered Liam once telling me he'd interviewed someone who'd been in prison for a number of years who'd made alcohol by straining molten boot polish through white bread. Boot polish!

Feverishly I scabbled under the hut to reach the small tin then prised the lid off. It was three quarters full. I grabbed a couple of matches from the box and, with my heart in my mouth, I ignited them and dropped them on the top of the polish. Both matches spluttered then, as the polish around them began to melt, it ignited, giving a steady dark bluish flame.

"Yay!" I shouted in my head and carefully, so it didn't blow out, I positioned the tin back under the floorboards, scraping a little gravel underneath to bring the flame closer. As more of the liquid polish ignited the flame grew stronger and, after several seconds, the bottom of the floorboard started to glow as well. I reached under and started to fan the glow, hoping that some extra air would make it burst into flame. The last thing I wanted was for the building to smoulder for hours.

"Oh thank god," I almost cried aloud as a flame came from the floorboard.

I fanned harder and slowly it started to spread. I could feel the heat on the back of my hand and, with a bit of luck, immediately above was a bed or a chair that would hide the flames until they'd taken a strong hold. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, a strip of flame appeared along a length of the floorboard and the floorboards on either side started to blacken. I rolled away from the side of the building then got to my knees and picked up the gun. Wayne looked over expectantly and I held up my thumb then the flat of my hand to get him to wait.

Perhaps at some time in the past there had been an oil or paraffin spill in that room or the wood had been treated with a pest repellent

that was inflammable but with a sudden whoosh the entire underside of the building was awash with flames. Incredibly no one inside seemed to be aware of it. I got to my feet, being careful to stay away from the window. I could feel the heat on the side of my leg and I saw Wayne get to his feet as well. I glanced down at the display on the top of the gun. There were some Chinese characters but the number 96% was visible and I hoped that was the amount of charge remaining. Any minute now someone would surely notice and raise the alarm.

It was at least five minutes before the quiet voices I could hear started to sound different, as though questions were being asked. A minute or so later boots started to clump around. One came close to where I was then there was a loud voice and the sound of something being dragged. I glanced at Wayne and gave him a thumbs up to indicate we were about to go into action. I curled my hand around the pistol grip of the gun and put my finger on the trigger then stared down at it, wondering where to put my other hand. With my dad's shotgun you just held the wooden support of the barrel but here there was just a mass of plastic cylinders. Uncertain what to do I grabbed the barrel of the gun from above but it felt very awkward. The shouting increased and I shifted my left hand to grip the front of the cylinder at the business end of the gun. It felt better.

Then the door burst open and someone ran out. Wayne lifted his gun and it made a sharp crack, quite unlike the bang of a normal gun but still loud. There was a scream and the sound of something falling onto the wooden platform. A moment later the other door opened and a guard looked out of the prisoner room to see what the noise was. I pulled the trigger and my arm jerked backwards sharply, wrenching my already wrenched shoulder. I cried out in pain, partially masking the sound of the guard's cry. He was clutching his shoulder but bringing his gun to bear on me so, gritting my teeth, I fired again. The recoil wasn't so bad this time as I knew to expect it but the guard's face disintegrated. Wayne's gun fired twice in quick succession and another body joined the two on the platform.

Everything went quiet. The guards inside now knew they were under attack and were no doubt rallying and getting organised. Behind me I heard a window shatter and pressed myself against the wall as someone leaned out and tried to shoot me. Wayne spotted the shooter

and fired, I felt the wind of his projectile as it passed under my chin. Smoke was now billowing and making me cough so I ran away from the building. More windows smashed and I half heard the sound of a screaming engine and the squeal of a tyre. Ignoring it I ran forward again, shouting for Wayne, and caught my foot on the ten centimetre high platform and went sprawling. Wayne wasn't able to react in time and I felt his entire weight on the back of my thigh as he lunged forward, reaching for the door. He slammed it open and I heard several shots and some wood splinters showered down on me. I got to my feet as quickly as I could and limped through the door. The other guard was sprawled a couple of metres away in a pool of blood and Wayne grabbed his shoulder and yanked him over.

"Get Clark!" he shouted, grabbing the guard's magazine pouch.

I hurried over to where Clark was lying on one of the thin mattresses. He seemed to be curled up, asleep.

"Clark!" I shouted, bending to grab his shoulder. "Clark!"

He groaned and rolled over and I gasped. His face was covered in dried blood and big bruises were already turning dark purple. He tried to open his eyes but they were gummed shut.

"No," he muttered weakly. "No, please, no more."

"Clark!" I shouted again, dropping to my knees, the gun clattering unheeded on the floor. "It's me, Nat!"

"Nat?" he said, his face twisting to find the source of my voice. "Nat?" His arm reached out and found mine and grabbed it tightly. "Is that you, Nat?"

"Is he alive?" shouted Wayne from the door.

"Yes," I shouted back, "but he's hurt. I need your help."

Wayne shot through the doorway at something then ran back towards me just as Itch came flying in through a window sending shards of glass everywhere. She rolled on the floor then jumped to her feet.

“Fuck!” exclaimed Wayne. “Where did you come from?”

“Get the hell out of there,” yelled Alex, backing in through the door. He had a gun in his hands and was firing it repeatedly.

“Wayne!” I shouted, “I need you to carry Clark!”

He hesitated a moment then tossed his gun to Itch. She ran over to join Alex in the doorway.

Between us we hauled Clark to his feet and slung him across Wayne's shoulders. He lurched towards the doorway.

“Coming through,” I shouted and Alex and Itch jumped through the doorway into a mass of flames.

Wayne hesitated and I shouted “to the right, to the right,” and pushed him. He put his head down and charged, lunging to the right as soon as he was through the door. I followed, feeling the intense heat through my clothes. The van was five metres away, its rear door up and open and the shopping bags shoved against the seats at the front. Alex and Itch were crouched on either side of the van, taking pot shots at the windows of the guard building. Wayne charged forward and launched himself head first into the van and Clark landed with a thump and a scream against the shopping. Alex grabbed me and threw me inside on top of Wayne and he and Itch jumped in after. Itch grabbed the strap and started struggling to get the rear door down.

“Go! Go! Go!” shouted Alex, banging the side of the van.

The van's engine revved hard and its front wheels screamed as they fought for traction. It careered away, lurching over to the right as whoever was driving made a sharp left turn. Itch and Alex fell against the side of the van, half dragging the door down then, as it straightened up, they managed to slam it shut. Then we all slid hard to the left as the van careered to the right.

“Turn left onto the highway,” I heard Ginny say calmly, “then go straight for two kilometres then turn right at the lights.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Oi,” I shouted after being slammed against the side of the van for the umpteenth time. “Slow down, for Christ’s sake! We’re being thrown all over the place back here.”

“We’ve got to get away,” called Marcie from the driver’s seat but she backed off on the accelerator a little.

“No point in being pulled over for speeding or dangerous driving,” I called back. “Stay with the rest of the traffic and try to be inconspicuous! Keep an eye open for anyone following.”

“Oh, all right,” grumbled Marcie and slowed down considerably.

“That’s better,” I said. “Is anyone else hurt, apart from Clark?”

“Itch has some cuts,” said Alex.

“Nothing of any significance,” she said. “Scratches only. They’re from the glass of that window.”

“OK,” I said. “But we’ll check you out anyway. Anyone else?”

“I’ve been shot,” said Wayne, conversationally.

“What?” I nearly screamed. “Why didn’t you say so before? Where?” and I scrambled over to look at him more closely.

“Here,” he said, pushing a finger through a hole in his overalls where the side of his chest started to swell out to become his belly. “I think it might have grazed me as well.”

“But there’s no blood?” I asked, looking closely at the hole.

“Don’t think so,” he said, waggling the finger. “Stings a little.”

“OK,” I said, “you’re fine. Now, everyone, let’s make some space for Clark.”

We shifted ourselves around and retrieved some of the shopping that had gone flying round the back of the van and managed to lay Clark out reasonably flat. I took off my jacket and rolled it up and put it under his head.

“He doesn't look too good,” I said, studying him.

His face and spiky bleached hair were liberally covered in dried blood and more blood was down the front of his t-shirt, partially covering the BEIJING EXPO 2029 design. He was conscious but breathing shallowly and groaning intermittently.

“Looks like he's been beaten,” said Wayne. “Better get his shirt and shorts off, see what other damage there is.”

“Do you think he needs a doctor?” I asked.

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Wayne, lifting the hem of Clark's t-shirt. “If it was just fists on his face probably not but if they used the butt of a gun or a club on his body he might have internal damage. Shit, they could even have got him in the balls and crushed 'em. Still, nothing looks broken.”

“Ouch,” I said, wincing.

We went round a corner and slid to the side a little. Clark cried out as his head hit a bag of cans.

“This is no good,” I said. “Marcie, Ginny?”

“Yeah, Nat?” said Marcie.

“Drive round a bit, see if you can spot a discarded mattress,” I said. “And some toilets or somewhere with water. Oh and some cardboard boxes.”

“There's the river just over there,” said Marcie. “Want me to stop?”

“Any sign of police or drones?” I asked.

"Don't think so," said Marcie a few moments later. "Oh, there's like a little park or something up ahead. Looks like it's got a loo."

"Pull up there, then," I said. "We need to clean him up and see how badly hurt he is."

A few moments later we lurched to the side again then got bounced up and down a little as Marcie went off the bitumen.

"Anyone know any first aid?" I asked when she turned off the engine.

No one did apparently.

"OK, everyone, get out and watch for anything," I said. "Wayne, you stay here and help me. You seem to know about beatings."

"Seen a couple in my time," he said. "Whatcha wanna do about the guns?"

"What guns?" I asked, rummaging through the bags looking for a dish or cups or something to hold water.

"Itch and Alex picked up some more," he said. "Not a good idea for them to be standing round brandishing 'em."

I jerked my head up and looked out the sliding door. Itch and Alex were standing there, looking around and holding their guns at the ready as if expecting an imminent attack. Just the sort of thing to attract the eye of a passing motorist.

"Oi!" I exclaimed. "Get those guns out of sight!"

They both jumped then Alex tried to hide his under his jacket.

"Put them in the van," I said. "In the front so they don't get thrown around. Oh, and Alex, make sure they're turned off."

"OK," he said and opened the back door of the van.

"Just forget it," I muttered to myself and turned my attention back to

the shopping. "Did you get any cups or bowls or anything like that, Wayne?"

"Nah," he said. "Figured we could use cans when we'd emptied them."

"Right," I said. "And no bottled water?"

"We've got a river full," he said.

"And nothing to carry it in," I pointed out.

"Well, yeah," he agreed.

I poked my head out of the van and saw a garbage bin beside the toilet block so I got out and went over. It was one of those ones with a metal strip blocking the lid so people could slip rubbish in but not rummage inside to take things out. Fortunately it was fairly full and there were some fast food containers near the top. I took one into the toilet and washed it as best I could then emptied one of the cubicles of its toilet paper.

"Right," I said, going back to the van. "Let's clean him up."

It took most of the toilet paper to clean the blood off Clark's face. There was a gash on his forehead, just above the hairline and one eye was puffed up and fully closed. The other was only bruised and the skin just above the eyebrow had torn. His nose had bled copiously and both lips were split and had bled as well. Strangely the lobe of one ear was torn and that had bled copiously over his neck. He winced repeatedly and taught me a few new swear words. The good news was that his breathing seemed more normal and he was out of his semi-comatose state.

"OK," I said, after sending Ginny for fresh water and more paper, "let's get his t-shirt off."

Clark obligingly raised his arms as far as he could and we managed to get his shirt off without hurting him too much. There were a number of bruises, some rectangular looking, but it was clear from his skinny torso that no ribs were broken.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“Like thit,” he lisped.

“Doesn't look like there's any major damage,” I said. “A lot of blood but it's all from superficial cuts. How do you feel inside?”

“Thor,” he muttered.

“And down below?” I asked, pointing to his crotch.

He shrugged, which I took to mean that nothing down there was overly worrying him. I confess I had no great desire to check and I sensed Wayne was a little reluctant as well.

“Well, we'll find out more when you need to pee,” I said. “Do you need a doctor?”

He shook his head and winced and swore again. I patted his thigh sympathetically.

“Hey, Wayne,” I said. “Did you get any medicines or bandages?”

“Umm, some Paracetamol,” he said, “and some packets of sticking plasters. They seemed to have mostly vitamins in the store. Oh and some Savlon.”

He found them in one of the bags and I fed Clark four paracetamol and daubed Savlon on the worst of the cuts.

“Well, that's about all we can do,” I said. “You'll heal in time. Try to get some sleep.”

Clark grimaced but made no attempt to get up. I got out of the van with Clark's t-shirt and went over to the toilet to try and give it a clean.

“Where's Itch and Ginny?” I asked.

“They went that way,” said Marcie. “Don't know why.”

"Hmm," I said. "Any sign of police or anything?"

"A helicopter went by a few minutes ago," said Alex. "It didn't look like it was searching for us and a police car went down the main road over there."

"Did the girls say they were coming back?" I asked.

"No," said Marcie. "Itch just said something to Ginny then they went off."

"OK," I said and went into the toilet to rinse the shirt. I wondered if they had decided to cut loose on their own and how long to wait before moving on.

They still weren't there when I came back out. The t-shirt was still a little stained but it would have to do.

"We've got five guns," said Alex, "and nineteen magazines, fifteen still full. One's almost empty."

"Five?" I said, wringing out the shirt one last time. "That's pretty impressive. How did we manage that?"

"We had one to begin with," said Wayne, "then there was the one from the guard outside that other building. The other three we picked up in the fight."

I nodded and looked around. "Still no sign of the girls?" I asked.

"Nope," said Wayne. "They'll be back. Not the types to do a runner, 'specially Ginny."

"We can't stay too long, though," I said. "I'm guessing the Chinese stayed to put out the fire and deal with their casualties but they'll be coming after us soon enough. I'm surprised the police aren't out in force yet."

"With a bit of luck no one saw the van," said Alex. "They'll know we had transport but with all the smoke and confusion ..."

"We can't count on it," I said. "The sooner we're lost in the bush the better. Did Ginny leave the map?"

"It's on the dash," said Alex. "I saw it when I stowed the guns away."

"OK," I said.

For want of anything better to do and to cover my indecision about moving on I went to check on Clark. Astonishingly he seemed to be asleep. I sat on the floor of the van with my legs hanging out the back. I suddenly felt totally exhausted. It had been a busy twenty four hours and extremely stressful. My shoulder was throbbing as well.

"Wayne must be totally knackered as well," I thought, "he's a lot bigger than me."

A police car went by and the driver looked over at us. I stifled the urge to leap up and instead looked away as innocently as possible, keeping the car in sight out of the corner of my eye. Incredibly it didn't stop. I waited until it was out of sight then forced myself to my feet.

"We can't stay here," I said. "We have to get moving."

"What about the girls?" asked Wayne, not getting up.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Why would they go off without saying anything?"

"God knows," he said. "Which way did they go, Al?"

"I didn't see," said Alex. "I was busy checking the guns. They're all powered off, by the way."

"That way," said Marcie. "They went along the river bank, behind the toilet block."

"That's the way the police went," I said, "except the road curves away from the river. You don't suppose ..."

“Nah,” said Wayne. “If they’re looking for us they’ll be looking for several people, not two girls.”

“And they don’t seem to be looking for us,” said Marcie.

“Which way did we come in?” I asked.

“That way,” said Marcie, pointing in the direction the police car had come from.

“So Ginny was taking us that way?” I asked, pointing down the road.

“Yup,” she said. “That way takes us down to the lake. There’s a minor road that goes off and disappears into the bush. Ginny thought there’d be logging trails and stuff we could follow and disappear.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “OK. We’ll get a move on and see if we can spot them from the road. They can’t have gone far.”

“What if we don’t find them?” asked Marcie.

“We have to face the possibility that they’ve decided to go off on their own,” I said. “We can’t stay here forever and they know that. We’ll go, say, 5K down the road. If we don’t find them we’ll come back in case they’ve come back here. If they haven’t, well, we’ll just have to carry on without them. To be honest I can’t think of any reason they’d just wander off.”

“Maybe they’re looking for fish or something,” said Alex.

“What for?” I asked. “We’ve got food, they know that. Anyway, if they are we’ll find them. If we don’t it’ll be because they don’t want us to.”

“What if those cops have arrested them?” asked Marcie.

“We’ll never know,” I said, “unless we happen to see them in the police car. This is the danger of going off without telling anyone.”

Wayne, Marcie and Alex looked glum and I knew how they felt. Even in the short time we’d been together I felt we were becoming a team.

If Itch and Ginny had ... deserted ... it would be a major blow, to our morale if nothing else. Equally, if they'd gone to do something and came back to find the rest of us gone, well, that would mean we'd deserted them. Either way it felt bad.

"I know," I said. "It's bad either way. Come on, let's go find them. Marcie, you happy to keep driving?"

"Sure," she said unenthusiastically.

"OK, let's go then."

We climbed back into the van and Marcie did a slow wide U turn to get us back on the road. She drove off, keeping the speed fairly slow and we both kept our eyes peeled.

Barely a hundred metres down the road she screamed "there they are!" and slammed on the brakes. Clark cried out in pain and Wayne and Alex both swore. One of the guns under my seat shot forward and cracked against my ankle.

"Where?" I said, ignoring the pain.

"Down there," she said pointing to a patch of reeds growing on the water's edge.

"Well spotted," I said, catching of glimpse of Ginny's long blond hair among the reeds. "What the hell are they doing?"

Marcie did another U turn and pulled up on the side of the road not far from where they were. I wound the window down and whistled. Ginny immediately went into a crouch and disappeared from view. There was no sign of Itch.

"Stay here," I said and got out of the van.

I half ran down to the reeds and, closer up, I could see Itch was in there as well. They both saw me and stood up.

"Hello," said Itch.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “We were worried about you.”

“We're collecting reeds,” said Itch. “For the back of the van.”

“They'll be more comfortable for Clark,” said Ginny. “That bare metal is so cold and hard.”

“What are you doing?” said Itch.

“Looking for you guys,” I said, uncertain whether to be angry or relieved. “We were worried about you. You should have said where you were going.”

“You were busy,” said Ginny. “We didn't want to interrupt.”

“You could have told one of the others,” I said. “Hell, you could have been picked up by that police car and we'd have never known.”

“What police car?” asked Itch, frowning.

“The one that went by a few minutes ago,” I said.

They looked at each other. “We didn't see it,” said Ginny.

“Probably hidden by the reeds,” said Itch. “Do you think we have enough?”

She pointed to the torn up reeds strewn over the bank.

“Yes,” I said feeling the urge to laugh hysterically. “Let's get them in the van and get out of here.”

* * *

We drove for what seemed like forever.

I later found out it was barely 60km but, even with the reeds, it was uncomfortable. Marcie joined the highway which went south west and, before it skirted the southern edge of the lake, she took a B road turn off that went across the dam. Then things changed from being

uncomfortable to downright painful because, after the dam, Marcie took a side turn onto a dirt track. She followed it for some distance then, after losing sight of the lake she took another turn. This time onto a track that wasn't even a dirt track. It was barely distinguishable from the general undergrowth but it seemed to follow a winding path between the trees and there was room to get the van through. In places a branch had been broken off but the breaks weren't fresh so it looked like nothing had been down there for some time.

We stopped at that turn off. Partly for those of us in the back to move around and get some feeling back into our numbed backsides but mostly to let Alex hide whatever marks we'd left turning off the dirt track with a leafy branch. Then we piled back in and Marcie slowly followed the gap in the trees. It went downhill, not steep enough to cause the van a problem but enough to make me wonder if we'd be able to drive back up if it rained and got muddy.

That seemed like a long drive as well but it was deceptive because we went at low speed. It was beginning to get dark so Marcie was careful. We didn't want to put the headlights on because, being this remote, they'd show up clearly to anything flying overhead. I was too tired to worry about any drone with infrared cameras. There was no way we could disguise the heat from the van's engine as a kangaroo. An elephant perhaps but there are no elephants in Australia.

As the last of the sun faded and the ground levelled off we stopped. We didn't pull over as there wasn't room to pull over. We just stopped, trees on each side. Marcie turned off the engine and we all sat there, feeling our blood fizzing from the travel and our ears hissing in the sudden silence. No one moved. I think we were all drained from the day's activities. I know I was. I felt like I'd been hung out to dry.

Marcie was the first to get out. The clunk of the door opening sounding very loud. She left it open and went into the undergrowth. Ginny got out next. She shut her door and stood there, looking into the darkness.

"I think the edge of the lake is just over there," she said, pointing off to the side of the van. "I can see a glimmer."

“Great,” I said wearily.

Those of us in the back had moved around several times, trying to find the best spots. Except Clark, of course. He'd stayed put on the bed of reeds, partly wedged against the side of the van by the shopping and our bodies. I'd started nearest the side door as I was the last to get in but by now it was Alex there. He slowly slid the door open then it slowly slid part of the way back again as we weren't perfectly level. He gave it a harder shove and it stayed open. He eased himself out and stretched then made way for Wayne. I followed then Itch. There was no handle to open the back door from inside.

It was wonderful to stand upright, to pull out some of the kinks and knots that had developed in my muscles. Even my sore shoulder seemed to feel better. We stood there aimlessly then one by one we went into the bushes for a pee.

“How you doing, Clark?” I said when I'd had mine.

“Uh ugh,” he said, twisting his head cautiously to look at me.

“Hurts, huh,” I said.

“Yeth,” he muttered.

“OK, give me a moment,” I said. “I'll find the paracetamol.”

I gave him two this time, figuring that it wasn't a good idea to give him paracetamol poisoning. He swallowed them dry as we didn't have any water in the van.

“I'll get some water,” I said, picking up the takeaway box I'd used earlier.

I was backing out of the van when he grabbed my arm tightly.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“Nath,” he said quietly. “Hey, thanths for coming bath for me.”

"I wasn't going to leave you behind," I said, matching his quietness.
"We're a team."

"I didn' thinth you would," he whispered. "I though ... well, I though ..."

"Hey," I whispered, taking his hand. "I'm just sorry we took so long to find you."

He nodded and turned his face away. He muttered something but I didn't catch it.

"What was that?" I whispered, moving my head closer.

"I didn' tell them," he muttered, turning his head back. "I told them you'd gone to Queenthland and left me behind. I told them you didn't lith me. They didn't believe me but I didn't tell them where you were. Even though ... even though I though you'd left me I didn't tell them."

"Oh god," I thought, my heart breaking. I suddenly realised that they'd have carried on working on him back at the Base since they knew I hadn't gone to Queensland. I'd been seen by that camera at the cafe. They knew I was still in Penrith and Clark probably knew where. We'd rescued him just in time.

"That was very brave of you," I said sincerely. "I'm so proud of you."

"Are you?" he asked. "Are you weally?" His hand squeezed mine tightly.

"Yes," I said. "And we do like you. I like you. Never forget that. I'm going to get you some water then you go to sleep. We need you fit and strong again as soon as possible."

"OK," he said and let go of my hand.

I hesitated then started to back out of the van again.

"Nath," he whispered.

“Yes, Clark,” I whispered back.

“I’m thorry,” he whispered. “I’m thorry I was such a loser this morning, you know, with the gun.”

“It’s all good, hun,” I said softly, reaching out to touch him. “You’re safe now, that’s all that matters.”

Chapter Seventeen

We were a quiet and subdued bunch that night. The adrenaline high of getting Clark out had worn off and most of us had aches and pains. We sat on the ground around the open side door with our backs to either the van or a tree, rarely speaking. Fortunately we had food. The only problem was that Wayne, although he'd done a superb job getting food and basic medicines and toiletries, hadn't thought to get cutlery or plates. We passed around a couple of cans, one of baby carrots and the other peas and sweet corn, taking mouthfuls and used the torn off tops to slice chunks off a ham. Even when the moon came up the group melancholia didn't go and fairly soon it was lost behind some cloud anyway.

Clark didn't eat. With the van no longer moving he'd fallen asleep and I figured that was better for him than food, especially as it would be painful for him to chew. I insisted Wayne slept in the van as well. There was room for two, maybe three at a pinch, and he'd had a heavy day. The rest of us just made the best of the patches of ground between the trees.

I lay there for a while, watching what stars I could see through the trees blink out as the cloud spread, too mentally exhausted to sleep but also too tired to think of anything constructive beyond a vague hope I wasn't lying on an ants' nest. I did fall asleep in time, a deep dreamless sleep of abandon, no longer caring what the next day, week, month would bring. Even trying to think a day ahead seemed absurd, let alone a month. I woke briefly in the darkness when I thought I heard Clark cry out but it sounded like Wayne was dealing with him so I quickly drifted back into the dark void. I awoke again soon after dawn. There were birds singing and a dampness from the dew but, blearily looking around no one else seemed to be awake. I got up stiffly, my shoulder hurting and went for a pee. Stumbling back to what could only be euphemistically called my bed, I bumped into Itch who was heading into the bushes herself. We half grunted greetings then I went straight back to sleep again.

I woke up to find it was raining. Fortunately not the heavy rain that causes floods but a light steady drizzle that had already soaked me to the skin. It was warm though and quite pleasant to wipe some of the

grime off my face. I guessed it was maybe mid morning but there was no real way of telling. I sat up and looked around. Itch was sitting cross legged a little way back up the track from the van. She had her hands on her knees and her head up and it looked like she was meditating. I flexed my arm and winced then slowly started to massage my shoulder. There were spluttery snoring sounds coming from the van which suggested Wayne was asleep. Alex was sitting with his back to the front wheel engrossed in playing with the magazines from the guns. He noticed me sit up and grinned a good morning but didn't say anything. I couldn't see Marcie or Ginny but there was a faint sound of voices coming from behind me so I guessed they'd gone to look at the lake.

I slowly got to my feet and shook my head to dislodge some water droplets that had collected and made myself feel dizzy. I propped myself against a tree and bent over with my hands on my knees until it passed then tried standing upright again. I felt weak and woolly and my damp jeans clung awkwardly to my legs. I managed to get one trainer on then stood there stupidly, looking at the other for a few moments before deciding I ought to put it on as well. I couldn't be bothered with the laces though.

"Ugh," I said, quietly and shook myself again.

"You look like shit," said Alex.

"Thanks," I said. "I love you too. Any idea what the time is?"

"Nope," he said. "There's half a can of rice pudding there if you want it."

"Nah," I said and yawned. I peered inside the van and both of them looked to be asleep. "Whatcha doing?"

"Checking the magazines," he said. "I've emptied the ones that weren't full and refilled them so we've got sixteen full ones, one half full and two empty."

"Oh joy," I said and scratched under my sweater.

He laughed. "There's thirty rounds in each," he added cheerfully. "They're just ball bearings, one centimetre or so. I suppose we can get some more fairly easily."

"Let's think about it another time," I said, not feeling in the least bit capable of a discussion on ball bearings. "I need a drink."

"I'll have a vodka and orange if you're offering," he said.

"Isn't it a bit early in the day for that?" I asked, finding another bite to scratch.

"It would be if we had any," he said, "but we don't so it isn't."

"OK," I said wondering what he was talking about. "30, huh?"

"Yup," he said. "If you can't do the maths that means we've a little under 500 of 'em."

"So we don't need any urgently?" I asked.

"Nah," he said. "If we come up against 500 Chinese we'll be buggered anyway."

I looked blankly at him for a few moments then wandered off to find the lake. I couldn't cope with the thought of 500 Chinese soldiers finding us. At least, not right at that moment.

"Hullo," said Ginny when I stumbled upon them. "Sleep well?"

They'd found a rock on the edge of the lake and had perched themselves on it.

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "Bit wet though."

"Sky's clearing," said Marcie. "Rain'll stop soon."

"Great," I said. "You two all right?"

"Yeah, we're fine," said Marcie. "We didn't have much to do yesterday

so we weren't exhausted like you were."

"You did well with the driving," I said, squatting down to scoop up some water. Someone had thoughtfully left the two cans on a flat stone at the water's edge. "You too with the navigating, Ginny."

"Thanks," they chorused.

I took a long drink then put the can back down and washed my face and hands.

"I can't seem to get my brain going this morning," I said, shaking my hands and looking at the sky.

"It's the rain," said Ginny. "Rain always dampens the spirits. Come and sit with us."

She shifted over to make some room and I sat on the rock next to her.

"It's actually a nice place," I said, looking around. "It'll be beautiful in the sunshine."

The lake was broad and seemed to stretch to the left and right endlessly. Across the water the shore looked to be quite flat for a short distance then rose up steeply until crags pushed their way out through the thick carpet of trees.

"This isn't really the lake," said Ginny. "If you look on the map this is more of a broad river that goes to the dam up there. The lake itself is off to the right, another twenty or thirty K further on and it bends round to the north. We can't see it from here."

"So we could go a lot deeper into the woods?" I asked.

"According to the map," said Ginny, "but I've no idea what the terrain is like."

"I'm guessing it's pretty mountainous," said Marcie. "We're in the Blue Mountains after all. I don't expect we'll be able to get up there," and she pointed at the high crags across the water. "Are we going to be

driving some more today?”

“I don't know,” I said. “My feeling is that we need a day or two to just chill and get ourselves organised. The last thirty six hours or so have been absolutely frantic. Clark needs to rest as well. But we do need more supplies. Wayne got a lot of food but there are seven of us and we're going to need more clothes. A few tents wouldn't go amiss.”

“That was nasty, wasn't it,” said Ginny. “What they did to the poor boy.”

“Yes,” I said, “but I would think that in their eyes we're less than nothing. We're all condemned prisoners, escaped prisoners.”

“So they'd do the same to any of us?” she asked. “If they caught us?”

“I hope not,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. She drew her knees up and hugged them while she stared out over the lake.

“Well, I'm going for a walk,” said Marcie, getting up. “There's been nowhere wide enough to turn the van around so far and I really don't fancy reversing it all the way back. There may be somewhere to turn around further ahead.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “Don't get lost. We'll never find you.”

“I'll be fine,” she said and wandered off.

“You sure you're OK?” I asked Ginny after a prolonged silence.

“Yes, I'm fine,” said Ginny in a brittle voice.

There was a long pause while I wondered what to say. I couldn't think of anything so I just reached over and put my hand on her arm in a show of support.

“No, I'm not fine,” said Ginny suddenly. “I'm a long way from fine.”

“What's the matter?” I asked. “I know this isn't a perfect camping holiday but we seem to be coping well enough.”

“I'm scared to death and I feel completely useless,” she said, her eyes locked on the opposite shore. “It'll be me who's caught next time, I just know it. I won't last long if they start beating me. I'm not tough like the rest of you.”

“We're not tough,” I said. “We're just ordinary people, just like you. It's just an extraordinary situation. And you're not useless, you're an important part of our team.”

“As if,” she said. “I can't even drive, let alone fire a gun. If the van breaks down I wouldn't have a clue how to fix it. All I know is how to cook and we haven't got anything to cook with!”

“You did a great job navigating,” I said. “In fact you were awesome. When we got away with Clark yesterday all hell was breaking loose with people shooting everywhere and smoke and fire and Marcie acting like she was some racing car driver but you kept your cool. You just calmly sat there and gave her directions like it was a quiet trip to the shops. I couldn't have done that. I'd have been shouting and getting confused. I've no idea how you managed.”

“I was terrified,” she admitted, glancing over at me, “but I pretended I was in Rome. There, traffic is a nightmare and sometimes shots get fired as well. And concentrating on the map and giving directions gave me something to do. But, now we're here, I've nothing to do again, no role.”

“Well that's more or less true of all of us,” I said. “Until something happens we're just going to be sitting around doing the best we can and trying not to get on each other's nerves. Anyway, I'm sure you have lots to offer, we just don't know what yet and whatever happens, you're one of us. You're part of the team, the crew.”

“You're a good person, Nat,” said Ginny. “I can see why you're our leader. You care but you're not afraid to make decisions either. I couldn't do that. I can't even make decisions.”

“Can I ask you why you're here?” I said. “Wayne said you were one of the criminals, not a political prisoner like me. I confess I can't really imagine you as a criminal. Are you a serial killer or something?”

I meant that as a joke but felt a momentary twinge in case she admitted she was.

“I'm not a criminal,” she said. “The Chinese say I am but I'm not. All I did was put some false information on my Migration Permit Application.”

“Oh,” I said, somewhat nonplussed. “What sort of false information?”

“I hated being here with the Chinese,” she said. “I was born in Australia although both my parents were Italian so I applied to migrate back to Italy. I said on the form that my reason for going was to look after my elderly mother in Naples but the Chinese found out she'd died eight years ago. They gave me five years on the Fourteen Rivers Project.”

“Wow,” I said, “that seems a little harsh.”

“The Chinese are a harsh people,” she said and sighed. “So there you have it, Ginevra the Master Criminal. I can't even fill in a form.”

“Well, I doubt we'll be filling in many forms now,” I said. “In fact that's one of the few benefits of the situation we're in. We don't have to deal with that bureaucratic bullshit anymore. We're free. We can come and go as we please and to hell with the Chinese!”

“Yes, to hell with the Chinese,” said Ginny thoughtfully. “That's how Marcie sees it as well.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Don't you know why she's here?” asked Ginny.

“Hey,” I said. “Thirty six hours ago I didn't know any of you existed and I haven't had much of a chance to get to know you.”

“Has it really only been thirty six hours?” asked Ginny. “It seems much longer.”

“Fraid so,” I said. “Tell me about Marcie.”

“She’s here because the Secretary of her Village wanted her to sleep with him,” said Ginny. “He was married and everything but that didn’t stop him. He wanted Marcie to move in with his family and be his mistress. He even offered to pay her.”

“I’m guessing she turned down the opportunity,” I said.

“Yes,” said Ginny. “That’s why she’s here. She was sent to the Project to be re-educated because she had a bad attitude and bad thinking.”

“How long for?” I asked.

“Indefinitely,” said Ginny. “She is supposed to stay there until she can show she has the right attitude and the right thoughts.”

“And how does she show that?” I asked. “By becoming a whore to Chinese Communist Party members?”

“It’s hard to see any other way,” said Ginny, “given the circumstances.”

“How old is she?” I asked.

“21,” said Ginny, “or perhaps 22.”

“Well, that explains her driving,” I thought to myself. “Given the choice of a lifetime of working the Project or working the Party members, I’d drive like an idiot as well.”

We both noticed at that point that the rain had stopped. Ginny put her hand out to confirm it, not that that proved anything since her hand was already wet.

“I’m going to get something to eat,” said Ginny. “Can I get you anything?”

“Oh, no thanks,” I said. “I think I might go for a swim. I feel grimy.”

“You are grimy,” she said. “Your back is all muddy. It's in your hair as well. You must have slept in a puddle. Don't go out too far, we don't know how deep it is.”

The surface of the lake had smoothed out and become glass-like now the rain had stopped. The sky was brightening and I could see the crags on the other side reflected in the water. It was hard to believe that I was an escaped convict, armed and dangerous with a small, a very small, army only a few metres away. In truth I just felt old and tired. And dirty.

I stripped off and went for a swim. The water was cold but clear and when I got out again I felt refreshed and invigorated. No longer old. I squatted at the water's edge for a few minutes, scrubbing my clothes then wrung them out and put them on. Now that the sun was out it was getting warm and I'd soon dry.

“I'm a driving instructor,” I said to myself, standing in the sun with my arms spread and my eyes closed. “A driving instructor who used to be in retail. I've got a woman who put false information on a form, another who wouldn't sleep with someone, a girl who's only crime is being Japanese, a magician, a hacker without a computer and a thief. The Chinese Empire doesn't stand a chance!”

I started to laugh but managed to stop myself before it became hysterical.

* * *

I rejoined the others after a while. My clothes were nearly dry but my trainers squelched noisily with every step.

“She's back,” called Alex, still sitting against the van.

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said. “We were just wondering what had happened to you.”

I saw that Wayne was up and tucking into the ham.

“How's Clark?” I asked.

“As you'd expect,” he said. “Although he looks worse. I gave him some more paracetamol. He's asleep again.”

“That's good,” I said. “Sleep is the best thing he can do at the moment.”

“Ahh,” said Itch, appearing around the side of the van. “Nat. What is your plan for today?”

“I'm really going to have to have a talk with her about plans,” I thought. “This is getting irritating.”

I forced a smile.

“I was thinking that today is a good day for consolidating and taking stock,” I said. “Perhaps this afternoon we could get together and bounce a few ideas around on where to go next.”

“You mean like Surfer's Paradise?” asked Alex.

“No, I didn't mean literally,” I said. “I meant start to think about the longer term. We can't stay here indefinitely, we'll run out of food soon anyway but should we stay in the bush or go to a city and try to hide there? Should we even stay as a group? That sort of thing. I'd like to know what you all think. After all, we don't want this to be a dictatorship. That's one of the things we're trying to get away from.”

Everyone started talking and I held up my hands for silence.

“Not now,” I said loudly. “Go away and think about it. I know I started something when I bashed that guard but you all followed me and you must have had some objective. Give it some thought and we'll talk about it this afternoon when we've all dried out and Clark is awake, at least. Is Marcie back?”

“No, not yet,” said Alex.

“I think I can hear her coming,” said Itch, cocking her head. “Someone is, anyway.”

“Shit,” I said only now hearing the distant rustling, “It may not be. Grab the guns.”

Alex had thoughtfully fitted a magazine into each gun and propped them up along the side of the van. We all grabbed one, except Ginny who cautiously picked the last one up using her finger and thumb. I took it off her and told her to get in the van and look after Clark. She gave me a funny look but did what I asked.

The rest of us found trees to hide behind and waited, guns poised. There was an almost palpable air of relief when Marcie appeared around a bend in the track not far away. We came out from behind the trees and put the guns back against the side of the van. Seeing this, Ginny jumped out of the van. I made a mental note that we ought to set up some sort of procedure for this sort of thing.

“Hey,” said Marcie, giving us a wave when she saw us. “I’ve found a tank!”

Chapter Eighteen

“Why would anyone put a water tank beside a lake?” I asked.

“Noooo,” she exclaimed, coming up to us, “an army tank, you know, vrrrrrrroom, boom, boom,” and she made matching arm movements to support the sound effects.

“What? Here?” I asked as we all stared at her. Then I started shouting. “Everybody! In the van! Now! Alex, get the guns, Wayne, grab the food. Move!”

“Stop!” exclaimed Marcie, holding up her hands. “It's old and, like, yukky.”

We all paused in our panicking and stared at her again.

“There's no one there,” she said looking around at us. “Come and have a look.”

This was a worrying new development. It could mean, for example, there was an army base nearby or we were in the middle of a training ground or one of those places where they practised their target shooting or blowing things up.

“Lead on,” I said and we all followed Marcie, except Clark who was dozing fitfully in the van.

It was perhaps another three hundred metres along the track and as soon as I saw it I realised why there was a track. The tank had made it and there was no sign of a track in front of it. At some point someone had driven it through the trees, breaking off a branch here and there then come to a halt and not moved it again. It just sat there, its gun barrel pointing into the trees. It kind of blended in with the forest as well since it was painted in camouflage colours. Up close it looked very big.

“How odd,” I said, looking at it.

It wasn't a burnt out or blown up wreck. In fact, it looked more or less

operational although there were a few spots of rust where the paintwork was scratched and grass and weeds were growing around its tracks. We gathered around and Wayne rapped it with his knuckles. It seemed very solid. Alex climbed up on top, using the barrel as a hand hold, and peered in through the open manhole.

"It's a two man tank," he reported, "or at least it's only got two seats. There've been some birds nesting in here and it's a bit mouldy. The rain must have got in."

"I wonder what it's doing here?" I said. "Surely no one would just abandon a tank like this? Even if it broke down wouldn't someone come out to collect it and repair it?"

"Nat," called Itch from some way off in the bushes. "Come and look at this."

I walked over to find she was standing by a dead body. It was clearly dead as a fair amount was missing, no doubt taken by dingos. Most of what was left was bones with a few dried scraggly bits of yukky crud, not even interesting to maggots. A couple of beetles played chase through its eye sockets and ants scurried over the rest of what had once been a face. It was definitely human though since it was still wearing part of an army uniform and there was a hand gun of some sort in a holster attached to a belt a couple of paces away. There weren't enough features left to say if the body was Chinese but the insignia were Chinese. I toyed with taking the pistol but I really didn't want to touch it.

"I wonder how long it's been here?" I said, looking down at the body.

"Can't have been that long," said Itch. "Probably only a few months. If it had been years the remains would have been covered by the undergrowth. The cloth doesn't look too decayed either."

"Could be," I said, noticing that whoever it had been had had a gap between his or her front two teeth.

Marcie and Ginny came over to see what we were looking at and both recoiled a little.

“Should we bury him?” asked Ginny.

“What with?” I asked. “We don't have a spade or anything.”

“It seems wrong to just leave him here,” she said. “Do you suppose he was a Christian?”

“Wouldn't have a clue,” I said, “but there's no sign of a crucifix around the neck. Come on, let's go back.”

Wayne and Alex were climbing all over the tank with the enthusiasm that guys seem to have for any motorised vehicle, especially military ones.

“We found one of them over there,” I said. “Dead. Any idea what happened?”

“It's electrically powered,” said Wayne. “Most of the back end seems to be big batteries and there's no exhaust outlet. I'd say they had an electrical problem and the whole thing just died. That would explain why they didn't radio for help. Maybe one of them walked back to wherever they came from and the other stayed with the tank and got bitten by a snake or something. There's a locker inside with some packets of stuff. Looks like rations although the writing's in Chinese.”

“But why didn't they come out and retrieve it?” I asked. “Surely these things are expensive?”

“Maybe the one who walked away died too,” said Alex, “or he couldn't find the way back. Maybe they got separated from their battalion and got lost. For sure, if they had a complete electrical failure any locator signal wouldn't be sent out and it would be a bugger to find a camouflaged tank in these forests without one. Worse than a needle in a haystack.”

“Should we find somewhere else to camp?” I asked.

“Up to you, love,” said Wayne, climbing down from the tank. “I wouldn't think anyone's going to come looking for it now, though. There's a wasps' nest in the end of the barrel.”

“OK,” I said. “We’ll stay where we are for another night at least.”

I wandered round the tank again then, for want of anything better to do, headed back to our van. Clark was up. Not just up, he was walking. A little gingerly but it was definite progress. His face wasn't recognisable though. It was a mass of purple bruises and black scabby cuts and he wasn't wearing his glasses.

“Hey,” he said seeing me.

“How're you feeling?” I asked.

“Lousy,” he said, easing himself down so he sat in the side doorway of the van with his feet on the ground. “Everything from the waist up hurts.”

“Have you peed yet?” I asked and he nodded. “Any sign of blood?” He shook his head slowly and winced.

I gave him some more paracetamol and dug out a can of condensed Cream of Chicken soup I'd found earlier. It was cold and almost chewy since it was condensed but he didn't seem to mind. He sat there quietly and slowly worked his way through it.

“What you were saying earlier,” said Ginny tentatively, “do you think we should split up?”

Everyone was back and Clark was awake so I didn't see any point in postponing the conversation.

“I don't know,” I said honestly. “What are your thoughts?”

“I'm sure we all have family,” said Alex. “But the Chinese will be expecting us to contact them so they'll be watching. Maybe in a year or so but, to be honest, we'd only be putting them at risk even then. I reckon we're non-people now. We certainly won't be able to live normal lives.”

“I could probably get by in the fringes,” said Wayne, “but, frankly, I wouldn't trust them as is in the fringes already not to dob me in.

'Specially if there's a reward on me 'ead.'

The others sat there. They'd probably already come to these conclusions. Certainly they'd had time to come to terms with these kinds of thoughts while they'd been waiting to be taken to the Project.

"I couldn't make it on my own," said Ginny. She sat there on the ground with her hands clasped tightly in her lap. "If we're going to split up then you might as well kill me now."

"Oh, you're just being melodramatic," said Marcie rolling her eyes and flapping a hand at Ginny. "If they decide to split up you stay with me. We'll get by."

Ginny gave her a weak smile and mouthed a silent 'thank you'.

"So the general feeling is that we stay as a group?" I asked.

Everyone nodded, except Clark who had his head resting against the rubber trim of the side door and his eyes shut.

"That's fine with me," I said. "I didn't really want to be left on my own but I didn't want to force anyone into staying. So, any thoughts on whether we stay in the bush or try to hide out in a city or something?"

"There are abandoned mines in these mountains," said Alex, "and I think there's a tunnel the other side that never got finished. Somewhere around Lithgow. They started it, ohh, ten years back but there was a big cave-in and something like a hundred workers died so they shut it down. We could maybe stay somewhere like that unless they've opened it up to tourists."

"That's an idea," I said, "although what would we do for food and stuff?"

"Why don't you contact your resistance buddies?" asked Clark without opening his eyes. "Wouldn't they help us? Fake IDs and plastic surgery and stuff?"

I sensed a general perking up of the mood.

"I don't know how to," I said. "I only knew one guy and he wasn't a friend and I don't know if they would risk exposure by helping us. It's academic anyway. The only way I can contact him is through a dating site online and we've no way of getting online."

"There's that phone you picked up," said Alex. "Couldn't you use that?"

"It'll have been reported stolen or lost by now," I said, "so it'll be blocked. Anyway, the battery won't last forever and we have no way of recharging it."

The mood of the group dropped again.

"I can unblock it," said Clark, opening one eye. "Can't recharge it though."

"How?" I asked.

"I wrote a little app a couple of years ago," he said then groaned as he straightened up. "All I gotta do is go online with a phone and download a Java X++ compiler. Then I can rewrite my app and we'd be able to use it on any phone. Piece of cake."

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "You can't use it to make calls but you can go on the net and not be traced. Send emails too."

"Then take it," I said, getting up to get the phone out of the van's glove box. "Work your magic on it."

"I will," he said closing his eyes again. "Soon as my head stops hurting. Oh, and I'll need a computer to actually write the app."

Wayne burst out laughing.

"Actually that shouldn't be too much of a problem," I said. "We're going to have to get hold of some gear so we might as well get a computer while we're at it. Does it have to be a desktop computer,

Clark?"

"Nah, laptop'll do," he said, "or a notebook, but not a tablet."

"How will you recharge it?" asked Itch. "Or them?"

"If we're going on a shopping spree," said Wayne, "we can pick up one of those portable solar panels."

"Actually, that's good thinking," I said. "You can get them in camping stores and we're going to need some sleeping bags. Tents too, if we're not going to find a tunnel to live in."

"And a gas cooker," said Ginny. "We can't have wood fires because of the smoke and we're going to need to cook something. We can't live on raw and processed food all the time. It's bad for our health."

"If we're staying in the bush," said Alex, "can't we raid some farms? Farmers always have endless stuff lying around. Tarps and ropes and useful things like that."

"If we go to a sheep farm we can get some fleeces," added Marcie. "If we go when they're shearing, anyway."

"When do they shear the sheep?" I asked. "Where I lived the farms were mostly crops."

"No idea," she said. "It was just an thought."

"Anyone know?" I asked.

"Isn't it in the autumn?" asked Alex.

"Sheep'd freeze in the winter," said Wayne. "Can't say as how I know. We got another problem though."

"What's that?" I asked.

"The van's rego," he said. "Sooner or later someone's going to get the number and find it's been nicked. The more we drive it round the

more likely it'll be."

"Ahh, yes," I said. "That could be a problem, and we won't be able to get another vehicle any time we want. It was lucky you found one that was pre-biometrics."

"Sorted," said Clark. "Have we got anything to drink?"

"I'll get you some water," said Ginny. "Half a mo."

"What do you mean, 'sorted'?" I asked. "You can hack the biometric ID in cars?"

"Nah, can't do that," he said. "The data's held in a database we haven't been able to hack. Oh thanks."

I waited while he drank some of the water Ginny had brought back.

"Water's boring, isn't it," he said, looking in the can. He probably looked distasteful but it was difficult to read his expression at the moment.

"The van?" I prompted.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Jesus, my head. Can't think straight. What ...? Oh, the van. That's easy. Just change the number. One of them hidden ones."

"What hidden ones?" I asked.

"You know, the special regos," he said.

"Anyone know what he's talking about?" I asked.

There was a general shaking of heads. I wondered if Clark knew himself or if he was confused and thinking of something else. I wouldn't blame him if he was.

"Jesus, you guys don't know shit," he said, shaking his head. He winced and dropped the can. "Ohhhhh."

He closed his eyes and focused within for a minute or so and we all waited.

“K,” he resumed. “You know there's all this surveillance crap, yeah?”

“Yes,” I said, managing to refrain from being sarcastic.

“Well the Chinkies often need to do things without the surveillance,” he said. “Like secret arrests and shit, so they've got a bunch of regos that don't get picked up. The system's programmed to stop recording when one of those numbers are spotted. Put one on the van and it'll never be seen again.”

“Are you serious?” I asked, incredulous.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You know what these registration numbers are?” ask Itch intently.

“Nah,” said Clark. “There's like, two or three hundred for each state. I don't fill my head with that kind of crap.”

“So what's the point of telling us then?” asked Marcie.

“I know where the list is online,” said Clark. “Just get me a computer. Or a bike.”

“You can go online with a bike?” I asked.

Clark just looked at me as though I was stupid. “No,” he said slowly. “Steal a new motorbike. They don't have biometrics.”

“Actually, he's right,” said Alex suddenly. “It's because people who drive bikes wear gloves and helmets. Biometric IDs mean you have to take everything off every time you start it which could be a problem if you stalled in traffic. Why didn't I think of that? Does it have to be new?”

“Manufacturers pre-programmed security codes,” said Clark. “Don't need to hack them. If you get a Hongyan bike the code is 91991, NIU's

are 19283. The others I'd have to look up. If someone's already bought it they'll have put their own code in."

"But you still need a rego for a bike though," I said. "Where would we get the plates, assuming we had the list?"

"That's easy enough," said Wayne. "NSW plates are black on yellow. If he's right about the surveillance we could just paint them."

"What if the number is on another vehicle?" asked Marcie. "If there's only two hundred I would think it's almost certain they'll all be in use."

"The system stops recording as soon as it sees the number," said Clark. "You could have a thousand cars with the same number, none of 'em will be recorded."

"Then we need to make getting you a computer a priority," I said. "This would make life a lot easier. Hey, would I be able to get a message through to my mum? She's in England and probably worried sick that she hasn't heard from me. I just want to let her know I'm all right."

"If she has email," said Clark. "We can't use the phone to ring anyone though."

"And my friend Paige?" I asked.

"Is she in England as well?" asked Wayne.

"No, she in Juma Creek," I said. "She was there when I was arrested."

"Best not then," he said. "You'll be a non-person now, like the rest of us. If you contact her you'll be putting her in danger. Maybe in a year or two but they'll be monitoring her. That's why none of us can go home. Can't risk our families."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. "I hadn't thought of that."

Aside from that little fly in the ointment, we all got a little excited at

this point because it seemed that, at last, we'd be able to do something positive rather than simply react to being hunted and we resolved to go on a shopping expedition that very evening.

Clark tried to demonstrate how to change our facial structures using the clag and makeup Alex and I had picked up but he struggled. Because of the swellings he had difficulty seeing anything and not having glasses meant that he couldn't focus properly on anything within arm's reach anyway. However, we quickly got the idea and had an entertaining afternoon painting each other's faces with glue and dabbing on powder and trying different effects. Wayne gave up fairly quickly as he'd never worn makeup in his life and couldn't come to terms with putting any on someone else. Alex, on the other hand, was thoroughly used to applying and wearing makeup so he had no difficulties whatsoever. We didn't bother to put any on Clark. His face was totally unrecognisable in its present state. It was also fascinating to see how a thickening of the nose, a bit of widening of cheek bones and a touch of work on the chin could dramatically alter appearance.

Before it got dark, Marcie reversed all the way back to the turn-off then drove us into town. It was nicely dark by the time we got there and only the supermarkets were open. Being a country town they stayed open as late as 9pm, which gave us a useful time-check as well. We dropped Itch and Alex off to go in search of somewhere that would have black and yellow paint for touching up cars and a pharmacy or similar for some +2.0 reading glasses for Clark. Their strategy was very simple: find a suitable shop, locate the desired item within the shop, smash a window, grab the item and run. A couple of cans of paint and a pair of glasses wouldn't be too much to carry. They both ummed and erred but decided in the end not to take a gun as it would hamper their running.

The rest of us were going to mount a major raid on the camping store.

Chapter Nineteen

Ten weeks later I finally got a reply from Bram.

I'd more or less given up any hope but Clark had made it part of his daily routine to check the Norwegian dating site and came running to tell me. His little app had worked like a dream and the day after we'd raided the camping store and done a smash and grab on the very same computer store that had got him captured he'd settled down to work, his new glasses making it possible for him to see the notebook's screen.

I don't pretend to understand the intricacies of what it did but, according to Clark, each mobile phone, regardless of its make or model, has four unique identifying numbers. One for the physical phone itself, one for the SIM card inside, one for its network connection device and, of course, the phone number that people use to ring it. Of those, only the phone number was used constantly, to route the phone calls through the phone network. The other three were for verifying account details and linking the phone to the user and were only used each time the phone connected to the network. These three were also hard-wired into the equipment and couldn't be changed whereas the phone number was assigned by the phone company and updated in the phone's software when the phone connected, after its other numbers were verified. It was done that way so that people could keep the same phone number when they changed phones.

The clever bit was the practical application of Clark's philosophy; if it's software it can be re-written and if it's hardware it can be worked around. Clark's app intercepted the requests from the network for the three hard wired identifiers and sent back fake ones. He'd written the app so that it read the hard-wired values then made up random values in the same format and sent them to the network instead. If they got rejected as invalid – most likely because the value was outside the manufacturer's range or the phone with those real numbers hadn't been sold and set up on the network yet – the app kept creating new ones until they were accepted and, given the number of phones in use, it was never more than two or three minutes before a set of values was accepted as valid and the phone could then be used. For safety, so that

the phone couldn't be tracked back to its location, he also had the app change those fake hard wired numbers every couple of minutes.

The only problem, and it wasn't much of a problem, was that the phones we acquired couldn't be used for phone calls since there was a 50-50 chance that the phone's number, based on the fake other numbers, was actually already in use on a phone call by whoever had the phone which had those hard wired values for real or would ring that other phone. The last thing we wanted was to call one of us and get enmeshed with some stranger – potentially ending up in a three or even four way conversation. Conceivably more if the other person was on a conference call.

On the other hand, there was a useful side benefit, at least for us. Since virtually everyone used their phones to pay for things the way we used to use credit cards, the phones we stole could be used to buy things. All we had to do was use the phone before its owner had the payment facility blocked. According to Clark this was actually a flaw in the system because the system assumed that since the owner of the phone had authorised the payment facility on the phone then it must be the authorised user paying for something. Clark said that if he had designed the system he would have had the payment processor systems checking the hard wired values as well to make sure that the phone being used matched the phone that seemed to be being used. Fortunately for us they didn't.

As it was, we'd developed our own little system. We'd drive around and find somewhere to stay for a few days or a couple of weeks then put on our glue and head for the nearest shopping mall. A couple of us would go into, say, a supermarket and do a shop then wait. The rest of us would spread out around the mall looking for a phone. More often than not it was a young woman who walked around with her phone in her hip pocket, thus making it easy to steal, but sometimes someone left their phone on a cafe table while they did something else or simply left it lying around. Whoever got the phone would then rush back to the store and pay for the shopping. It bothered me that we were stealing from the bank accounts of young women most of the time, often they were young mothers who'd shoved the phone in the pocket while they dealt with their kiddie, but I got used to it after a while. Of course, filling the van with diesel was easy. We just filled up

at a fuel station then drove off. Their surveillance cameras afterwards would show that no one had been there. It was pretty cool.

Anyway, once Clark had his app working and we'd acquired a couple of phones for general use such as getting maps and so on, I connected to the Moteplassen dating site as Siggie Thorvald and sent Sven Magnussen a date request. That was at the end of September. I checked several times a day for a while then it tailed off to once a day then I gave up. Clark, since he preferred life online to real life, then started checking for me. Bram replied on Sunday December 5th.

We were living in a house at the time. We'd come across a deserted farmhouse on an overgrown farm that nestled in a fold in the foothills of the Blue Mountains not far from a little town called Gingkin. It was one of those three church, two pub, one school, no shop towns that litter the Australian countryside once you are away from the built-up areas on the coast. We liked it because it had no neighbours for miles, was largely invisible because of the hills on three sides and it had four bedrooms which allowed the sleeping arrangements to change. With the three tents we'd started with, Wayne and Alex shared one, Marcie and Itch shared another and I shared with Ginny. Clark was happy to stay in the van. Over time, of course, and with our growing sense of security, people's emotional lives started to re-emerge but it was difficult to change the sleeping arrangements without complex and potentially awkward discussions on just why so and so was being asked to move to a different tent. With the four bedrooms came the opportunity to change the sleeping arrangements quietly and without undue fuss. I got a room to myself, not counting the possum that lived in the chimney. Alex and Itch elected to share a room, Wayne ended up sharing with Clark which neither minded because Clark stayed up all night consorting with his hacker cronies and slept a lot of the day and Marcie and Ginny elected to have a room to themselves. This last was something of a surprise to me and I hadn't seen it coming, particularly as Ginny was a good Catholic girl, but we were all changing in one way or another.

So, on that Sunday, I was admiring the setting sun from the back verandah of the farmhouse overlooking the tennis court with a nice hot cup of coffee from our portable gas cooker when Clark came looking for me. We didn't use the tennis court, incidentally. Partly

because we didn't have any racquets or balls but mostly because the court was badly overgrown and barely none of it was left except for the rusty wire fencing around it. Hide and Seek was about the only feasible game playable there.

"Sven's replied," said Clark, coming out to join me.

"Who?" I asked, coming slowly out of my reverie.

"That dating site," he said, "you know, that guy, whatsisname."

"Bram?" I exclaimed, jerking upright.

"The one and only," he said.

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"Just to meet up in a couple of days," said Clark, "at some cafe in Norway."

"Norway?" I said, confused. "How the hell am I going to get to Norway?"

"Beats me," he said, his glasses glowing red in the light of the dying sun. "Here," and he thrust his notebook at me.

"How about 2pm at Cafe Norway in Vestpunkt, Svartby in two days?" read the message. It was signed by Sven and had two Xs and a smiley.

"Even if he doesn't know I got arrested surely he knows I'd never get a permit to go to Norway," I said staring at the message. "What kind of idiot is he?"

"Hey, I've never met him," said Clark. "He could be any kind of idiot for all I know. You gonna say yes?"

"I can't say yes, can I," I said. "Hey, you don't suppose he's managed to get out of Australia himself?"

"Just a sec," said Clark.

He took back the notebook and opened up a command window and started typing in strange commands. The window suddenly spewed out a load of gibberish which he stared at.

“Looks like the message was sent from Frankfurt,” said Clark. “That’s in Sweden, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “What would Bram be doing in Sweden?”

“Ohhh,” said Clark. “Baidu Maps says Frankfurt’s in Germany.”

“Germany?” I said, even more puzzled. Then the penny dropped. “Ohh, that’s because of the VPN. It’s a German one so the message must have been routed through a German system. That means he’s probably still in Australia after all.”

“So how’s he going to get to Norway to meet you?” asked Clark. “Maybe the message is in code.”

“If it is it would’ve been nice if he told me what the code was,” I said. “I’m not one of these idiot savants who can crack a code without thinking about it.”

“Maybe he’s just giving you the brush off,” said Clark.

“Then why bother to reply?” I said. “And why in two days? He won’t know when I got the message. I might not get it for three or four days which would be after.”

“No idea,” said Clark, absently. He was focused on his computer. “He’s got it wrong anyway. There’s nowhere in Norway called Svartby or Vestpunkt.”

“Maybe the message was from another hacker,” I said. “Someone like you who thinks it’s fun to spoof dating sites.”

“I’ve never spoofed a dating site,” he said, “and the only Cafe Norways I can find with Baidu Search are in Morocco and Iceland.”

“Try a different search engine,” I said, “not that it matters. It’ll be a

waste of time.”

I slumped back down again. I don't know what I expected Bram to be able to do for us but I was a little disappointed he wasn't seemingly doing anything.

“That's interesting,” said Clark as the sun slipped behind the hill to the west and the cicadas got louder. “Svartby is Norwegian for Black City.”

“You speak Norwegian?” I asked.

“No, I'm using Translator,” he said. “Does Black City mean anything to you?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Oh,” he said and typed in something else. “Apparently By can also mean Town. How about Black Town?”

“Isn't there a Blacktown in Sydney?” I asked. “Wasn't there a big riot there when the Chinese moved in?”

“Umm, oh yeah, so there is,” agreed Clark. “And Vestpunkt is Norwegian for West Point.”

“West point? You think he means the western point of Blacktown then?” I asked.

“Dunno,” said Clark. “I wonder where that is? Ohhh.”

“What?” I asked.

“There's a shopping mall called Westpoint in Blacktown,” said Clark. “That's an interesting coincidence.”

“So you think he's saying to meet him in a cafe in the Westpoint Mall in Blacktown?” I asked, sitting up again and leaning forward. “Is there a Cafe Norway there?”

“Umm, no,” said Clark. “There's three cafes and four takeaways but none called Norway. There's the House of Coffee, Muffin Time and Odin's.”

“Jesus!” I said, disbelievingly. “That's the one. Odin's. Wasn't Odin the head of the Viking gods?”

“Weren't the Vikings Swedish?” asked Clark.

“Nah, they were Norwegian,” I said happily. “Bram's telling me to meet him in Odin's Cafe in Blacktown the day after tomorrow. What time was it?”

“Umm, 2pm,” said Clark.

“Tell him I'll be there,” I said, hugging my knees in anticipation. “Damn, this is exciting!”

“Umm, OK,” said Clark, a little reluctantly I thought.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“Umm, how well do you know him?” he asked.

“Not that well,” I said. “I saw him a few times for a couple of weeks, back before I was arrested.”

“So are you going alone?” he asked.

“Good question,” I said. “I suppose so. After all, he won't know any of you guys. He'll be suspicious.”

“And we don't know him,” said Clark. “You don't either. How do you know you can trust him?”

“Of course I can ...” I started then stopped. “What do you mean?”

“I think Clark is saying that you don't actually know him well and you were arrested soon after you met him,” said Itch, emerging from the shadows behind the verandah.

“Hey, how long have you been listening?” I asked.

“I was reading inside,” said Itch. “I found an interesting article in the Chinese Journal of Astrophysics.”

Itch had been in her final year of her doctoral research in Astrophysics at the Beijing University campus in Canberra, formerly the Australian National University, when she was arrested.

“So you think Bram had me arrested?” I asked. “Why would he do that?”

“I have no idea,” said Itch, “but you are one of us and our leader and we don’t know him. We have a duty to protect you.”

“Damn right,” said Clark emphatically.

“No problem,” I said, feeling a little relieved. At least I think I felt a little relieved. I had thought Bram was an attractive man so maybe there was a faint whiff of anticipation in there as well. So much had happened in the last few months that Liam’s memory was no longer as dominant as it had been. “Just send a smiley to acknowledge. We need a plan.”

* * *

I pushed open the door of Odin’s Cafe just about on 2 o’clock, feeling nervous.

The cafe was on one corner of the main entrance to the mall and opened onto the road as well as into the shopping centre. It was fairly busy but not overly crowded as the lunchtime brigade had moved on. Bram was sitting alone at a table for four by the wall, roughly mid way between the two entrances. I noticed he had a good view of the whole of the interior. At the table next to him, Wayne was tucking into something with gusto and Ginny was stirring a coffee. It was probably her second since they’d been there for three quarters of an hour already. His shopping bag and her overnight bag were on the floor under their table.

Over by the low window-less wall that separated the cafe from the mall, Alex and Marcie were chatting. Marcie had a good view of the interior and Alex kept glancing out at the Mall concourse. His sports bag was resting on top of the wall and Marcie's guitar case was propped up beside her. Clark was outside in the street, waiting next to a bus stop a couple of shops down and on the other side of the road. I couldn't see him but I knew he was there. I'd been waiting with him only moments before. He had a box which claimed to contain an A3 laminator in his arms.

Itch was parked a couple of streets away. We'd left her with the van because, in a bustling place like Sydney, there was a good chance that some passing Chinese might take offence at a Japanese in a cafe. Few Chinese went to more rural areas. She was able to monitor the cafe because Clark was live-streaming it from his position. If trouble ensued she would get the van round as fast as possible and pick up Ginny who was too scared of bikes to drive one or ride pillion. She'd then high-tail it out of there to our pre-arranged rendezvous. She also carried all our belongings in the back of the van as we always travelled as a group and took everything with us. Going back somewhere was potentially dangerous. Three of our motorbikes were in a parking bay in the road a little up from the cafe. We'd had to circle for quite a while before finding one vacant, real life being very different to the movies, but we needed to be able to get to them quickly if we had to. My bike was parked beside the rack for bicycles at the entrance to the mall and my gun was in my backpack.

Bram glanced up when I walked in then looked away again, dismissing me. He's been there for twenty five minutes already. I'd watched him arrive and pointed him out to Clark and the others had seen him via the live stream. Importantly, he had arrived alone and hadn't appeared to talk to himself or the lapel of his nicely fitting grey suit so he was probably on the level. Regardless, he was as good looking as ever and moved with assurance. I, on the other hand, was in scruffy jeans and a nondescript jacket and was nervous. I took a deep breath and walked over, nearly colliding with a waitress I hadn't see because I was focused.

"Sorry, it's taken," said Bram when I pulled out one of the three spare chairs.

I put my crash helmet on the chair and sat in another so I was beside him and looking towards Wayne and Ginny. I noticed a surveillance camera high up in a corner. Being in a cafe it probably had a microphone as well.

"I said it's taken," said Bram more firmly.

"Hello, Bram," I said.

He frowned and stared at me. "You look ... different," he said. "Have you put on weight?"

"Could be," I said, "although you should never ask a lady that."

He studied my face then nodded. "That explains why you haven't been picked up," he said. "Surgery?"

"No, just makeup," I said, unwilling to explain Clark's technique to evade surveillance. "Why would you think I'd be picked up?"

"I, er, heard you'd, umm, become a free woman," he said.

"And did you also hear about my ... difficulties ... before that?" I asked. He suddenly looked a lot less attractive.

"I did hear rumours," he said. "Welcome back."

My eyes narrowed and I could feel the glue pulling so I forced them wider again even though I was getting bad feelings inside. He'd heard I'd been arrested and done nothing to help? Not even after hearing I'd escaped? This didn't sound encouraging.

"Thanks," I said, tersely. I'd have got up and left at that point but I had six others to consider.

"Coffee?" he asked.

"Just an orange juice," I said. I had a funny feeling I wouldn't be there long enough to drink a hot coffee.

“OK,” he said and went to order.

Ginny let her eyes wander around the cafe and I felt them pass over me. She showed no sign of anything but I felt her implied questioning and gave a slight negative twitch of my head. She said something to Wayne with a casual laugh and he reached down and shifted his shopping bag slightly.

“Be here in a moment,” said Bram, sitting back down again. “So how’ve you been?”

“I’ve been better,” I said. “You?”

“Oh, so so,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I last saw you. I confess I’ve been wondering why.”

“Why it’s been a long time?” I asked, puzzled.

“Well, yes,” he said, “but also why now?”

“Ahh,” I said. “I was hoping you’d be able to help me with a small problem.”

“I see,” he said slowly. “And the nature of your small problem?”

“It’s about appearances,” I said, “especially ones that can be deceptive. I was hoping you or some of your friends might know a better way. After all, I do want to fit in better.”

“Quite,” he said then smiled charmingly at the waitress. She looked tired and didn’t seem to notice him as she plonked a glass of orange juice down in the middle of the table. He waited until she’d gone back behind the counter.

“I don’t have as many friends as I used to, I’m afraid,” he continued, “and those that I have have rather changed the way they do things. Still, for old times sake, I can always ask. After all, you are almost one of the family.”

“I can understand that,” I said, not really understanding but I did pick

up on the 'one' in what he said. "Although I have my own family now to consider."

"Oh, congratulations," he said, trying to beam as though I was saying I'd had a baby. "A small family or an extended one?"

I was about to say there were seven of us when it occurred to me that if he wasn't on the level and knew about our breakout he'd be able to identify the others quite easily so I said "ten" instead, just to muddy the waters.

For a fleeting moment his face registered shock but it was only fleeting.

"Family is such a beneficial thing," he said. "It's always good to have the support of others."

"I couldn't agreed more," I said. "Can I count on your support as well?"

"Don't forget your orange juice," he said, pushing it over towards me. He glanced at his watch. "You know, I really have to go. Could I see you again?"

"Sure," I said. "It's always nice to get together for a chat."

"Great," he said, standing up. "I'll be in touch. Lovely to see you again."

"Likewise," I said, staying seated.

He hesitated then left the cafe, heading out into the mall. I watched him go then took a sip of the orange juice. It tasted bitter.

"Bastard," I thought coldly. "So I was just disposable, was I?"

Chapter Twenty

We made our separate ways back to where Itch was waiting with the van. It seemed a sensible precaution even though we had changed our appearances. After all, it wasn't impossible that the surveillance system had been programmed to look for groups of seven with a mix of gender and age similar to ourselves. Our efforts with the clag could only go so far and changing age or gender was beyond our skill levels. Once back, I quickly updated the others with the bare fact that Bram was going to talk to the powers that be in his organisation and get back to me. I saw no particular need to share my bad feelings about the meeting or my suspicion that Bram regarded me as superfluous.

We headed, as planned, north west out of Blacktown, heading for Richmond and the northern stretches of the Blue Mountains. The intent being that it would be good, every now and then, to move to another district. Even though the Chinese didn't seem to be searching for us, no doubt they didn't view us as important enough to warrant the expense as they'd assume we'd be caught sooner or later by their normal surveillance, we felt it was a basic precaution. We strung out with Marcie and Ginny in the van and the rest of us on bikes. Itch rode pillion behind Alex as she couldn't drive a bike and there was no room for a second passenger in the van. She was learning although, as we only had the four bikes, she preferred to ride with Alex. I had also had to learn and I hated riding pillion. I found it a lot scarier being on the back than driving the thing, especially going round corners. Marcie was teaching Ginny to drive the van. In fact, it was Ginny who was driving when the van pulled over some way out of Blacktown.

"What's the problem?" I asked, pulling up beside Ginny and raising my visor.

The other bikes were strung out behind and, as they caught up, they passed and continued driving for some distance before pulling over. It was one of the protocols we'd established. A group of bikes pulled over wasn't particularly suspicious. After all, it was fairly common for groups of bikers to get together for a ride-out and pull over to discuss something but it would be unusual for four bikes to be pulled over with a van.

“I think we took a wrong turn,” said Ginny.

“Looks like it was maybe ten K back,” said Marcie from the passenger seat. She was studying her phone. “I think we took the wrong exit at that big roundabout, you know, the one that went off to Windsor and Richmond and all the roadworks. We should be heading the other way.”

“So where are we heading?” I asked, noticing the others had pulled over a kilometre or so further ahead.

“Back to Penrith,” said Marcie, looking over. “Sorry about that.”

“But it's still the mountains, isn't it?” I asked.

“Sure,” said Marcie. “They're everywhere.”

I thought for a moment then looked down at the bike's monitor. I had barely 30% battery charge left, which meant I had maybe 40km capacity. My bike, being the smallest, had the least capacity but the others would be getting down as well. Even Wayne's, a big laid back NIU which could do 210kph on the flat could only do 250K on a full charge. Less if he went fast. Alex's Jianghuai bike had the extra weight of a pillion although even two-up its range was a little better than mine.

“How far is it from that roundabout to Richmond?” I asked.

“Maybe another 5K,” said Marcie studying her phone. “Then another 15K to get into the mountains.”

“Which is 30K,” I thought, checking my battery level again. “How far's Penrith?”

“Another 10K or so,” said Marcie.

“OK,” I said, making a decision. “We'll keep going to Penrith.”

Penrith was in the mountains and the road out of Penrith got lost among the forests barely 5K further on. It made more sense to do that

than turn back and it was unlikely that there'd still be an alert out for us in Penrith.

"I got confused," said Ginny apologetically.

"It's not a problem," I said. "You OK for fuel?"

"Over three quarters of a tank," she said.

That meant the van was good for another 600K or so. Electric vehicle technology still had some catching up to do. Electric cars were better as they could carry more batteries and apparently some of the best could now get from Sydney to Melbourne on one charge if driven carefully but we didn't have the skills to bypass the biometrics for a car and the bikes gave us an extra dimension of flexibility. We could also get one of the bikes in the back of the van if we had to, although not all four.

I nodded to the girls, flipped my visor down and glanced over my shoulder before opening up the accelerator. With a faint whirr and a louder rattle from the chain the bike accelerated although I kept my speed down until I caught up with the others. I waved as I went past and they fell in behind the van. A few K further down the road I slowed down and waved the van past to let it take the lead. With Marcie navigating while Ginny drove it was easier. I felt sad and didn't want the hassle of concentrating.

I suppose part of me was worried about what we'd do if Bram and ACT NOW! wouldn't help us but mostly I was sad for myself. My first 24 years had gone well and I'd been happy and fulfilled then Liam had been arrested and executed and I'd spent the next six years or so in emotional shock. I'd turned into something of a zombie and although that had dramatically changed with my own arrest and escape the future seemed to be a looming void. Is this what my life was turning into? An endless camping trip with a sharp underlay of fear? For the next fifty years or so? I didn't know if I'd half hoped for a relationship of some sort with Bram; I wasn't even sure I wanted a relationship with anyone, but I'd had a vague sense of the possibility. His actions had made it clear that if there was anything there it was completely one sided. I'd been just someone with perhaps some

information about Liam and when it turned out I didn't have any he left me to the Chinese. He hadn't seemed that callous.

We must have gone through Penrith without my realising, so lost was I in my own thoughts. I only became aware we were on a windy road with forest on both sides when Alex drew up alongside and Itch waved at me then pointed to the side of the road. I waved back and took my hand off the accelerator to let the bike slow down then pulled over onto the gravelled edge. Alex pulled up behind. Wayne trundled by on his DIU, his helmet turning to look then he, too, slowed down and pulled over a little way ahead. Clark and the van didn't seem to notice what was happening behind them and kept on going.

I propped the bike on its side stand and got off then took off my helmet and shook out my hair. Bike helmets are not the best headwear for people with fancy hairdos, not that I had a fancy hairdo, and mine felt flat and funny.

"Problem?" I asked as Itch got off the back and came over. Alex was leaning on the handlebars of the bike.

"We have driven past Linden Observatory," said Itch. "I would like to go there please."

"Oh," I said, a little nonplussed. "You think it will be safe?"

"The Chinese have no interest in such places," she said. "It is a historic site only."

I glanced into the sky to see where the sun was. Riding with the headlight on wouldn't help with the low battery. Wayne had done a U turn and come back to join us. He pulled up beside Alex and both were silently watching me and Itch.

"We've maybe a couple of hours before sunset," I said. I was about to say "no, we must press on," then changed my mind and said "sure" instead. There was no immediate sign of any danger and life would only deteriorate even further if we simply moved from one desolate spot to another endlessly. Some sightseeing wouldn't hurt, maybe even some beach visits when we got tired of the mountains.

Itch gave a pleased smile and went to get back behind Alex.

“Hold on,” I said. “The others haven’t seen us stop. Wayne, you want to catch them up and bring them back? We’ll wait here. We’re going to go be tourists.”

“Sure,” he said, his voice muffled by his helmet. He whirred off, accelerating fast up the road.

Alex got off his bike and we all just stood there for a few moments. A solitary car whizzed past, heading towards Penrith. It looked like there were a couple of people inside, both asleep. I wondered if they’d been travelling a long way or if they were both just bored with the scenery.

“Here they are,” said Alex, seeing Wayne and Clark coming round the bend a kilometre or so away. The van wasn’t far behind.

“OK,” I said. “Lead on.”

We got back on our bikes and headed towards the turn off. It was bitumen for a short distance then became a gravel road, with weeds coming through. It didn’t look like it had been used for a while. Very quickly the road started to climb and got quite steep.

“Makes sense,” I thought, steering around the clumps of weeds and between the ruts caused by water run off. “Who’s going to build an observatory in a valley?”

The road ended at a large, chain link double gate. They were held closed with a padlock and a few rusty links. A faded and battered sign proclaimed this was, indeed, the Linden Observatory. The opening hours were partially obscured by another sign, peeling around the edges, that proclaimed the Observatory was closed until further notice. On the other hand, admission to the grounds and picnic area was free, which was nice.

We all got off our bikes to look at the sign and Ginny and Marcie got out of the van to join us.

“Why’re we here?” asked Marcie.

“Itch wants to visit the Observatory,” I said.

“Oh,” said Marcie. “But it's closed.”

“Won't be for long,” said Wayne. “Push them gates down with the van.”

“Won't someone notice?” asked Ginny.

“You saw the road,” said Wayne. “No one comes here. 'Sides, we can make 'em look like they fell down. They's all rusted, like.”

“Fair point,” I said. “Ginny, the gates. Lose 'em.”

She hesitated then walked slowly back to the van and got in. She started it then edged it past the bikes until the front was close to the gates. Then she wound down the window.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “What if I damage the van?”

“You won't,” said Wayne.

Ginny looked at me for confirmation and I nodded so she inched the van forward and pushed. The gates bulged inwards but held.

“Back up a bit and give it some oomf,” I called.

That worked. The chain snapped and the gates flung apart. The left gate came off one of its hinges and hung drunkenly and the right gate swung back and banged against the side of the van, causing Ginny to brake hard.

“Move up a bit,” I called to Ginny and, as she drove slowly forward, I got the others to bring the bikes through.

We closed one of the gates and propped the other against its hinge then just left them. They probably looked fine to any casual observer. The road continued upwards then levelled off in an overgrown car park. It had spaces for maybe twenty vehicles so it looked like the Observatory had never been overly popular. Beside the car park were

three large buildings in a row with a smaller one extending off to the side. One of the large ones had a domed roof and another had a large doorway with a sign beside it that said, in faded lettering, 'Visitor Centre'.

Even though the place was obviously deserted we took our usual precautions. With guns at the ready – I'd learnt by then not to call them rifles as their barrels didn't have the rifling groove inside to make bullets more stable in flight – we spread out and surrounded the buildings, looking for a way in. All the doors were locked and the windows closed but that didn't present much of a problem. Wayne fiddled with a window on the other side and got in then unbolted a door. We scoured all the buildings using the technique we'd all seen in movies, namely hugging the walls and peering cautiously through doorways. It was unnecessary, thankfully, since the place actually was deserted and appeared to have no surveillance cameras. It was, however, full of dusty telescopes.

The big building at the end held the biggest telescope which had Itch in raptures. She told me later it was a 30 inch optical telescope and apparently the entire roof slid out of the way so it could be used. What intrigued me was that the telescope had a seat fixed to it for whoever was using it to see through. It moved with the telescope. The middle room, the one with the dome, had a smaller telescope – a 24 inch reflector – and the third was full of smaller telescopes laid out like a museum as well as a small gift shop with a few books, postcards, mugs with telescopes on the side and things like that. They were all covered in dust and some mice had enjoyed themselves with some of the postcards.

"Hey, Nat," called Alex, browsing through the gifts, "come and have a look at this."

"What is it?" I asked, walking over.

"The Visitor Book," he said, twisting it on the counter for me to look at. "Look at the last entry."

"Wow," I said, reading it. The last entry was dated Sunday 20th April 2020. Apparently Jason McKendrick thought the Observatory was

'totally awesome'. "That's, like, nearly thirteen years ago. Why do you suppose no one's been here since?"

"It's probably to do with these," he said pointing to an open packet of chewed face masks and a dried up bottle of hand sanitiser beside the till.

"How do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"Don't you remember the Great Pandemic?" he asked. "That COVID thing?"

"Not really," I said. "I was only eighteen or so. Jesus, that was a long time ago."

"I'd say they closed this place to the public because of the virus," said Alex, looking around, "and never reopened. They probably ran out of money or something."

"I guess," I said. "I doubt there's any food here though, and even if there is it won't be edible. I wonder if there's any water?"

I went outside to see if there were any water tanks and saw a path leading into the forest with a sign that said 'Planetarium and Picnic Area'. I followed it and found, after a short walk through the shrubbery, a large clearing that could once have been grass and another building. Looking away from the building, the view was spectacular. The Observatory was at the top of the mountain and the trees had been cleared. Way off in the distance I could see a faint smudge of dirt on the horizon which was probably the pollution of Sydney but the rest was a magnificent carpet of trees which undulated with the rise and fall of the ground. In all directions there was a faint blue haze which was probably why they were called the Blue Mountains. Apart from some birds there was no sound at all.

After gazing at the view for some minutes I realised I ought to check the Planetarium. I rattled the door but it was locked then I walked all round trying to find a window. There wasn't one. It was just walls. It seemed unlikely that anyone would have locked themselves in so I abandoned it and went back to the main area.

“Can we stay here for a while?” exclaimed Marcie when I went in. She was just coming out of the toilets looking very happy. “There’s plenty of water and there’s even a shower!”

“Sure,” I said. The place was deserted and habitable. It seemed as good a place as anywhere else and the bikes needed charging.

“Awesome!” she cried. “I’m going to get my towel!”

“Where’s Marcie going in such a hurry?” asked Clark who was coming in through the door as she ran out.

“She’s going to have a shower,” I said. “Apparently there’s lots of clean water. There must be some tanks around here somewhere. You want to find them?”

“Sure,” he said and wandered off.

Outside, I asked Alex and Ginny to take the van and the bikes around the other side and hide them from satellites or anyone who happened along. Connecting the bikes to our portable solar panels could wait until the morning since they wouldn’t charge overnight. I wandered back inside and found Itch and Wayne playing with the big telescope.

“Hey Nat,” said Itch absently when she noticed me.

“Does it still work?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “There’s no power.”

“There is power,” I said. “There’s a pump sending water to the toilets.”

“Really?” she said. “Maybe I can get this thing going again then.”

“Do you know about electrics?” I asked, looking around. “It seems awfully complicated.”

“Yes and no,” she said studying the side of a console. “I’ve spent a lot of time in Physics labs and the equipment’s always breaking down. No money for repairs and maintenance. Ah ha!”

She twiddled with what looked like a couple of knobs and the entire side came off. Inside was a mass of wiring.

“I probably spent half my time troubleshooting electrical faults,” she added, getting on her knees and starting to pick her way through the spaghetti. “Time I should have spent on my research.”

Wayne pushed against the barrel of the telescope and it rotated with a faint creak.

“So what did you actually research?” I asked.

“Oh, a planet was detected in another galaxy, back in 2020, ” she said, her head inside the console. “A binary system named M51-ULS-1, to be precise, in the Whirlpool Galaxy. My research was to firstly confirm it was a planet and secondly to identify some of its primary characteristics.”

“That’s interesting,” I said. “So if you can get this telescope working again, can we see it?”

“Oh no,” she said. “The galaxy is only visible from Earth above 42° north, so parts of Europe, northern China, Russia, that’s about it. The planet itself is far too small to be visible this far away.”

She emerged from inside the console and started flicking switches on top.

“So how did you research it?” I asked.

“X-rays,” she said absently then frowned and went back under again.

I left her to it. For the first time since I’d met her she seemed happy and engrossed and, after three days she, with some help from Wayne, managed to get the big telescope working again. For the rest of our time there, waiting for Bram to get back in touch, she spent the evenings giving us tours of the night sky which led to a conversation I found somewhat surreal and more than a little depressing.

“So how many planets are there, Itch?” I asked while a couple of the

others were using the telescope.

"Quintillions, I expect," she said. "The universe is vast beyond imagining, although we actually know of perhaps ten thousand."

"Including yours?" I asked, wondering what it would be like to be on another planet.

"It's not mine," she said. "I didn't even discover it. But, yes, and it's the most distant planet that we know of, if it is a planet."

"Do you suppose there might be intelligent life on it?" I asked, peering up at the night sky through the opened roof.

"Very possibly," she said. "There are a large number of intelligent life forms on this planet and it would be unreasonable to suppose that no other intelligent life exists anywhere else. Many of those planets we know of are in the Goldilocks Zone, which means they have similar characteristics to Earth and one would expect similar characteristics to create similar life."

"That is so cool," I said. "I wonder if they've found a better way to live? One that doesn't involve war and killing."

"I confess I find it unlikely," said Itch. "Admittedly we only know of life based on DNA and there may well be other mechanisms out there but even if there are it seems likely that any life will have to compete for limited resources and that is the biological origin of war. Even social biosystems such as ants, which are highly cooperative within their nest, wage wars on other nests when resources are limited. It is a biological inevitability that the Chinese, for example, when they started to run out of resources, will cast around for alternative sources and fight to obtain them. The one biological imperative is survival and the altruistic do not survive."

"So what will happen when Earth's resources run out?" I asked, not liking her answers. I had, perhaps naively, assumed that as our race developed we'd find ways around this. "We'll set out to conquer space?"

“It's already started,” she said with a shrug. “The Americans led the way into space but in the 2010s the Chinese and private enterprise took over. They're not doing it for scientific knowledge, they're doing it for commercial gain which is another side of controlling resources.”

“So what will happen when we come across a planet with life on it?” I asked.

“The same as when the British discovered Australia,” she said. “Declare it empty and set about killing the natives. Is there any of that cake Ginny made left?”

Chapter Twenty One

Clark didn't like Bram, of course, which was why he sent off an image of Bram to his hacker buddies to see what, if anything, they knew or could find out about him. He hadn't had any response by the time Bram got back in touch again, or if he had he hadn't told me about it. As a group we'd never actually discussed Bram but I got the impression the others didn't much like him either, although that could simply have been them picking up subconsciously on my feelings towards him. Whenever Bram cropped up in general conversation we all tended to veer away onto other things. So, all in all, it wasn't particularly surprising that when we did hear from him I was suspicious.

Actually that's not true. I wasn't suspicious; that's too strong a word. Disquieted would be better, or perhaps perturbed. For one thing the message was entirely in English with no attempt to hide things behind Norwegian words. Of course, Driftway Reserve and Pemulwuy would be a lot more difficult to disguise that way than Blacktown or Westpoint so I figured he hadn't bothered. Equally, his invitation to a picnic there and to 'bring some friends' bothered me. I supposed Norwegians have picnics even though at this time of year it would be pretty cold in Norway, but why 'bring some friends'? Surely if he was going to help he could let me know and my friends could come along later when the arrangements had been made? Was it really necessary for us all to be there? On the other hand, of course, it could be that he was going to help us and had made some arrangement that needed to be implemented straight away. After all, if he wasn't going to help then why get us all there? Why even bother to meet? All he had to do was never get in touch again as I had no other way of contacting him other than through the Norwegian dating site. As I said, it was perturbing.

So it came to pass that, eight days after the meeting in Blacktown, I was squatting in some thick grass overlooking the path that separated the two halves of the lake at Driftway Reserve in the western Sydney suburb of Pemulwuy. I'd never heard of it, none of us had, but it was on the map and, as it turned out, on the ground as well. Pemulwuy is a very built-up, largely residential area with a fairly small reserve smack in the middle and near two major roads.

From my vantage point I could see the path and the small picnic area that extended a little way out into the northern of the two small lakes. Much of the surrounds of the lake were hidden by trees but on the north-western-most edge of the lake was a large warehouse or distribution centre of some sort. Behind me lay the other smaller lake. It, too, was surrounded by trees on three of its sides but the eastern edge was mostly trimmed grass, rather like a park. At the far end was a small area with swings and slides for kiddies to play in. There was a path that meandered around both lakes and through the trees which marked the outer edge of the reserve and was joined in the middle, like a figure 8, by the path where I was. Aside from the trimmed grass the reserve didn't have a well cared for look and there were at least three shopping trolleys in the northern lake.

I got there an hour and a half before the time of our meeting. Partly because I'm not good at waiting and partly because I wanted to watch and get a feel for the area. I was also alone, against instructions. The others were nearby, of course, but I was reluctant for us to meet Bram here as a group without some fairly definite assurances. Ginny was with the van over beside the warehouse. Itch was on the opposite side of the lake. She didn't have a bike but she was by far the fastest runner and would be able to get to the van quickly. Clark and Wayne were at each end of the middle path and Marcie and Alex were at the corners of the southern lake. They each had one of the bikes

I daresay it would have been sensible to get hold of some walkie talkies but we'd agreed a long time before that they'd be suspicious. Mobile phones on the other hand are ubiquitous and not having one would be suspicious. The only real problem was that we couldn't call each other because of the limitations of Clark's phone hacking. Still, we did have internet access, and Clark had, after extensive searching, found a chicken farm in Victoria that was large enough to have its own email server but small enough to not worry unduly about security. He'd set us up some email accounts so we could communicate that way through our phones.

Of course there were any number of commercial free email systems on the internet, including the remnants of the once immense Gmail system but we couldn't access them because of the Great Firewall of China which blocked global internet access to anyone inside China,

Australia, Korea, Taiwan and the various other islands that the Chinese had overrun. VPNs could get through because they hid the sender's IP address, which was how I was able to access the Norwegian dating site, but the very use of a VPN was suspicious. A single occasional message to the dating site was one thing but a couple of hours of the seven of us giving situational updates would undoubtedly be traced. Idle chit chat by bored employees of a chicken farm shouldn't attract any attention. We'd also devised a complex code system involving words such as ROOSTER and INCUBATION in the subject line but scrapped it when we realised that in the heat of the moment it would cause chaos and confusion. Instead we opted for a simple GREEN (all clear), YELLOW (something's happening) and RED (get the hell out of there NOW!) system. A reference to HEN meant Bram.

And so I squatted there in the grass, my phone in one hand and my bag with my gun in it beside me. Every ten minutes I received six messages saying GREEN. I also sent out GREEN messages every ten minutes as well so the others would know I hadn't gone to sleep. It was a Wednesday lunchtime in a residential part of Sydney and no one, beyond an elderly couple walking their dog, was around. It was quite hot and a number of flies buzzed. Other than that it was incredibly boring. Each second seemed to take five minutes to pass, although, as the twelve o'clock rendezvous approached I started to get increasingly nervous.

At the previous meeting in Blacktown, Bram had arrived twenty five minutes early and I rather expected him to do the same here. 11:30 came and went with no sign of him, as did 11:35 and 11:40. By 11:45 I was convinced he wasn't going to come. The 11:50 GREENs came and still there was no sign of him. I felt sick to my stomach and my knees were hurting but I couldn't get up as I'd be visible. At 11:51 I started to key in the message to tell everyone to leave then deleted it. The meeting was set for 12:00 and the least I could do was wait until then. He might have been delayed so it would be sensible to wait perhaps even half an hour after that time although I doubted that my nerves would let me.

At 11:54 my phone pinged softly and there was a message from Wayne saying YELLOW HEN which suggested that Bram had arrived and

was making his way towards the eastern end of the central path. It also suggested he was alone. My bowels turned to water in a mix of fear and anticipation. Whatever was going to happen was about to happen and I wished it wasn't. My throat was dry and my hand, as I reached for my bag, was shaking. I opened my bag and flicked the power switch of my gun to the ON position. It was fully charged and I had one full magazine in the gun and a spare in the bag. It whined quietly for a couple of seconds then went silent. I took some deep breaths and let them out slowly hoping they would slow my heart down but they didn't. The thumping made it difficult to hear any footsteps so I cautiously parted the grass fronds and peered through. All I could see was the picnic place and a section of path.

Then he appeared. He walked slowly along the path, carrying a simple cloth shopping bag, and stopped where it split off to go to the picnic area. He rotated slowly, getting a good look at the entire area, then checked his phone. He looked around again then slowly made his way out to the picnic area, barely five metres from the path.

As picnic areas go it was dismal. It was simply a flat patch of short grass with an electric barbecue and a table with two benches. Not even the ducks on the lake paid it any attention. I saw one see Bram and turn away so it was unlikely that many people picnicked there and fed the ducks. He stopped at the water's edge, looked around again then sat on the table facing the path. He wasn't wearing a jacket, just a plain shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of casual trousers. He didn't appear to be armed and his face was unreadable. He put the shopping bag down on the table beside him.

I sent out the message GREEN HEN to show he had arrived and everything seemed OK then waited for the GREEN replies to come back. All but Marcie's came back promptly. Nervously I stared at the screen, willing her to respond, and after what felt like an eternity she did. GREEN. I breathed a sigh of relief. I checked the time, 11:59, closed my eyes briefly tried to give myself a pep talk.

I rose to my feet, my bag in one hand. Bram was twisted round, looking back across the lake. I stuffed my phone in a pocket and stepped out from my hiding place. He twisted back and saw me. He didn't react other than to lock on to my face. A slight breeze picked

up and blew a strand of hair across my forehead. I looked around and there was no one else in sight so I slowly walked towards him. I stepped off the path and stopped roughly two metres away.

“Hello,” I said.

“Where are your friends?” he asked, not looking around. He continued to watch me.

“I don't know,” I said, which was sort of true. I didn't know exactly where they were.

“I told you to bring them,” he said.

“But you didn't say why,” I said. “Have you something to tell me? Or us?”

“It does concern you all,” he said.

“So are you going to help us?” I asked, not going any closer.

“Help is not a constructive word,” he said, “although I am happy to help as far as it is within my power to do so.”

“I'm sure,” I said, a little confused by this. “I meant your group. Will ACT NOW! help us?”

“Ahh, ACT NOW!,” he said and only then looked around. “What sort of help did you have in mind?”

I was more confused by that. Wasn't it pretty obvious that we wanted help disappearing?

“Umm, disappearing,” I said. “We're all alone and vulnerable. I was hoping you guys would be able to help us disappear, perhaps even new identities. Or maybe some resources, somewhere to live, maybe.”

“I see,” he said. “And what do you offer in return?”

“What do you want?” I said. “We have little to offer except ourselves.

We're all willing to help out with things that might be useful."

"What sort of things?" he asked, looking around again. He checked his phone.

"You know, resistance things," I said. "We've got some skills. We've been able to evade the Chinese for over three months now. We could help you in your fight against the bastards."

My phone pinged and I pulled it out of my pocket. There was a message from Ginny saying YELLOW. This was a little worrying. Something was happening over at the warehouse. With a bit of luck it was just their lunch break.

"I see," he said. He thought for a moment. "You know Nat, your way of changing your appearance is really quite good. You look quite different to the last time we met but at the same time you're still recognisably you."

"Thank you," I said. "So are you going to help us?"

"Where are your friends?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said again as my phone pinged.

"Oh Nat," he said sorrowfully. "I had such hopes for you."

I looked at my phone and this time it was a YELLOW from Itch.

"Are you going to help us?" I asked again, firmly.

"You need to understand that ACT NOW! is a large organisation," he said, also checking his phone. "And as such it is fluid, constantly evolving."

My phone went again with YELLOWs from Marcie and Alex at the southern end of the lakes.

"So basically you're saying no," I said, beginning to get very alarmed. Something was now happening at both ends of the reserve and I was

in the middle.

"I would love to say yes," said Bram, "but in all honesty none of you have any worthwhile skills."

"We have a hacker," I said, looking round. I could see some people now at the warehouse end of the northern lake. It looked like they were coming along the side through the trees. I put my bag under my arm and slipped my hand inside to hold the gun's grip. There was definitely something wrong here.

"You mean Clark?" he said with a laugh. "That waster couldn't hack his way out of a paper bag."

"What's going on?" I asked. "There are people over there, coming through the trees."

He turned to look as my phone pinged again then again. REDs from Wayne and Clark.

"You god-damned bastard," I snarled, ripping the gun out of my bag. "You've bloody betrayed us!"

"It's just part of the evolutionary process," he said, and hurled his shopping bag at my head.

I ducked instinctively and let off two shots in his general direction. The bag missed but suddenly flew off in strange way then I felt something whizz past my face. There was the sound of running along the path and I looked up to see three soldiers with their guns raised running towards me. I tried to raise my gun but Bram grabbed me from behind.

"It's all over," he shouted in my ear so I rammed the end of my gun as hard as I could to where I thought his head was.

He cried out and let me go so I doubled over and ran as fast as I could away from the three soldiers. One of them stopped to take aim and another shouted something in Chinese then I heard a couple of sharp cracks as they fired. Then three more soldiers appeared ahead

of me, coming from the other side. I skidded to a halt and took a pot shot, getting one of them in the leg. The other two raised their guns then lowered them again when they realised I was between them and the other soldiers. If any of them tried shooting me and missed they'd likely hit one of their own.

"Stay!" shouted one of the soldiers. "No move!"

The two uninjured ones were running towards me and I looked back. Those three were also running towards me. Panicking I froze, no idea what to do. In hindsight I should have gone back into the grass but I'm not a trained fighter, just a scared woman caught in a very bad situation. Then there was a sudden blurred movement behind the three soldiers and one of them crashed heavily into the ground. With a screeching of tyres a motorbike slid in front of me and Wayne shouted at me to get on. I just stared at him and he shouted again, even more loudly. A sudden furrow appeared in the side of his crash helmet and his head jerked back then he grabbed the front of my jacket and threw me towards the back of the bike and opened up the accelerator. I managed to get half a leg over the pillion and one arm over his shoulder before I was wrenched off the ground.

He had more sense than I did and headed straight into the thick grass and away from the path. The bouncing of the bike jolted me into a more upright position and I came to my senses and started firing blindly behind me as we raced alongside the southern lake. I caught a momentary glimpse of a white van hurtling along the road then there was an agonising pain in my leg, at the top of my thigh. I cried out and let go of the gun which disappeared somewhere behind me. A large four wheel drive vehicle in camouflage colours came careering off the road and onto the grass, heading towards us.

"Hold on!" shouted Wayne and the bike sped up, slipping, sliding and bucking like a storm tossed piece of cork. I wrapped my other arm around him and clung on to his broad back for dear life.

Another bike came hurtling down the path, probably Alex but I couldn't see the rider's face. He was riding one handed and the other hand was firing a gun at the camouflaged car. He must have hit it as its windscreen shattered and it careered into a tree. Alex slammed on

the brakes and skidded round in a sharp turn, one foot on the ground for support, then came chasing after us. I saw another camouflaged vehicle hurl onto the grass. The pain in my leg was unbearable but I managed to twist my head to look the other side and saw yet another camouflaged car speeding along the road the other side of the lake. It was ahead of us and would be blocking us when we got to the end of the lake. I twisted to look back at Alex, just in time to see the rear wheel of his bike slide out from under him and he and the bike skated across the grass. The car chasing him slowed then stopped.

“Alex is down!” I screamed but Wayne ignored me. “Wayne! Wayne!”

“Leave it to Clark,” he shouted, just as the car ahead of us reached the corner and turned into the road lying directly ahead of us.

It didn't stop turning. It did a full 360 then rolled over and Wayne changed direction slightly to go around it. Moments later Marcie emerged from a bush and ran to her bike parked nearby. I nearly fell off the back as Wayne flew off the pavement and landed the bike on the road, nearly crashing into a car that had stopped to see what the crashed army car was doing.

Wayne managed to keep the bike upright and sped off up the road, slowing only briefly to turn right. Marcie disappeared in the opposite direction. I sensed something overhead and looked up to see a large military drone not ten metres above, effortlessly keeping level with us. I was about to warn Wayne when I remembered we had planned for this possibility. I had forgotten in the heat of the moment but Wayne clearly hadn't. He took a left turn then another left turn, doubling back in case anyone else was following us. No one was but we hadn't lost the drone. He took two right turns and then braked hard, making the tyres squeal. The drone overhead kept going then came round in a circle but it was too late. Wayne had gone into the supermarket car park.

We'd got to Pemulwuy early in the morning and explored, anticipating the possible use of a drone. We'd found two places with covered areas for vehicles. One was the supermarket and the other was an Aged Care Home which had a large covered portico over the pickup and drop off area for the residents. It wasn't as good an option as the

supermarket but it was a good backup spot if something went wrong with the car park. Nothing did go wrong though. The van was already under the cover in the supermarket car park and Wayne skidded to a stop beside it. The side door was already open and Wayne threw me inside then ripped the number plate off the bike. We'd taken the precaution of unscrewing all the bikes' number plates and reattaching them with wire just in case. We didn't want the Chinese to find out we'd been using the restricted numbers since they might change them. He then jumped in the back of the van and Ginny drove us sedately out of the car park, looking for all the world just like another shopper. Itch was in the passenger seat looking calm and inscrutable.

She drove to our second rendezvous, again pre-planned. Marcie was already there, sitting astride the bike and playing with its console as though she was getting directions. There was nowhere to park though so Ginny sedately drove around the block and tried again. This time a car was just pulling out and she made rather a mess of the parallel parking. It was a skill she was having difficulty with. Marcie saw us but stayed where she was and within a minute Clark turned up with Alex on the back.

"Alex is hurt," he shouted to Ginny.

Wayne and Itch came tumbling out of the van and lifted Alex off the bike. He'd hurt his leg and shoulder in the slide and was bleeding. His helmet also had two furrows from bullets but there was no sign of any head injury. They got him in the back with me then Itch got in the front and Wayne jumped in the back. My own leg was screaming at me but I scrambled out of the way.

"Let's get out of here," said Wayne tiredly. "This is just a giant frigging balls-up."

"We need to stop somewhere very soon so I can look at Alex," said Ginny. "We'll probably need to stop at a pharmacy as well. Itch, keep your eyes open."

Ginny pulled out and headed west along Butu Wargun Drive. Our plan, such as it was if anything went wrong, was to get back to the relative safety and anonymity of the mountains. Marcie and Clark

followed behind on the two remaining bikes.

“Oh dear,” said Ginny, a kilometre or so further along. “There's a road block. What shall I do?”

Chapter Twenty Two

Frankly I couldn't handle it. My leg was on fire and I was feeling woozy. I was aware of what was going on but somehow I was floating above it all. I couldn't be bothered to answer.

"Nat?" called Ginny urgently. "Nat? What shall I do?"

"I think she's gone to sleep," I heard Wayne say.

"How could she sleep at a time like this?" said Itch. "Pull over Ginny."

I felt the van lurch to the left and gasped as a fresh harpoon of fire shot through my buttock and down my leg. Then the side door slid open.

"What's all this blood?" demanded Itch. "Wayne, have you been shot? You're covered in blood."

"That's not mine," said Wayne, tiredly. "I've sprained my ankle and I think I've broken my wrist but I'm not bleeding. It must be Alex."

"Get out the way," said Ginny angrily and pushed Itch to the side. "No, it's not Alex. He's got some nasty grazes and cuts but they're not bleeding much. It's all over the tents and under ... oh God, it's Nat! Nat? Nat? Have you been shot?"

I felt someone rolling me over then exclamations of dismay then Ginny started issuing instructions and hands were doing things to my leg. What, I don't know but it hurt like hell and I tried slapping the hands away.

"Hold her hands, someone," said Ginny and someone grabbed my hands. "Itch, you drive. We've got to get to a pharmacy. We need bandages and things. She's lost a lot of blood."

"What about the roadblock?" asked Itch from the other side of the mountains.

"Smash through it if you have to," said Wayne. He seemed to be as far

away as Itch. "We can cover you from the back."

It was about there that I gave up and fainted. I was told later that it hadn't been a roadblock. It was just a pre-Christmas booze bus looking for drunk drivers. One of the police was scanning the registration numbers of the vehicles as they were queued up waiting to be breathalysed. When he scanned the van's he waved to Itch to tell her to go around. However, and I think she showed great courage here, she didn't drive out of the queue and go round the booze bus, she wound down the window and told the policeman that the two bikes behind were with us. God knows what he thought as he must have seen the three bodies in the back of the van and liberal quantities of blood but he must have assumed we were operatives on some secret mission and didn't ask any questions. Anyway, we got waved through and Itch stopped at a pharmacy. Ginny insisted that there wasn't time to find someone's phone to pay so Marcie and Clark went inside the pharmacy with Ginny and waved their guns at the girl at the checkout. There was nothing subtle about it. It was armed robbery, pure and simple. I was sorry to have missed it.

We camped somewhere that night. I have no idea where. I had lots of bad dreams and apparently I was quite feverish. Ginny seemed to think it was a combination of shock and loss of blood but the good news was that the bullet had come out. I'd been shot in the bum while sitting on the back of Wayne's bike and the bullet had come out half way along my thigh muscle without hitting any bones. A little higher and it might have hit my kidneys or intestines. A little more to the left and it would have hit my spine. Of course, had it gone lower or to the right it would have missed but us recipients of war injuries never talk about that possibility.

Alex had some nasty scrapes on the side of his leg and his shoulder from where he'd slid along the ground. Wayne hadn't broken his wrist. He'd just wrenched it badly trying to keep the bike upright and he'd also sprained his ankle. The others were uninjured but we were all subdued and depressed after that, me perhaps more than any although it's difficult to compare levels of depression since we all show it in different ways.

I didn't know what to do. That was the crux of it. When we'd broken

out of the Air Base and then a second time, rescuing Clark, I'd been largely reacting to events. Then we'd had a long period of what boiled down to a camping trip in the Blue Mountains. Admittedly we'd had to take precautions but things were helped by Wayne's skills at breaking and entering and Clark's computer wizardry. For some reason the others had made me their leader and decision maker and I had led them into a trap. I alone knew Bram and, solely on what I thought I knew of him, we had gone to meet him in the hope and expectation of help. Even though the expectation wasn't really there for the second meeting, the hope was and it had turned into an ambush. Fortunately we had managed to get away but three of us were injured and I felt responsible. I guess in some strange way I felt my own injury was retribution but I was racked with guilt for Alex and Wayne's injuries. They both got injured rescuing me from my own stupidity. I shouldn't have agreed to meet Bram that second time and, given that I did, I should have reacted and got out when the YELLOWs came through, not waited for the REDs. Even then I should have high-tailed it across the grass and not waited like an imbecile on the path with two sets of soldiers charging at me from opposite directions.

In the process we'd also lost two of the bikes. Admittedly they could be replaced but none of us had the energy to do that anymore. We'd probably also lost the invisible registration numbers. Clark had rescued Alex after he crashed but there hadn't been time to take off the rego so the Chinese almost certainly knew that we knew what those registrations did. With a bit of luck all they'd do is change the list of reserved numbers and Clark could probably find the new list but what if they changed the system? What if they reprogrammed the surveillance system to continue recording when these numbers were spotted rather than stop recording? It was quite possible that our days of free movement were now over. The sad part was that we had no real way of knowing. We could go for days, weeks, even months getting more and more confident that nothing had changed then one day we'd be caught.

But this wasn't the core of it. The core was that I, all of us, had got our hopes up and they'd been dashed. Worse, we'd been betrayed which none of us had seen coming. We'd made some plans in the event of discovery but we hadn't expected the Chinese to be told

where we would be. Deeper than that though was something else. While we had the hope of Bram helping we had a future. That hope was gone. We had no future. OK we had Clark and Wayne and whatever skills the rest of us brought but could we really hope to hold out indefinitely against the almost infinite resources of the Chinese? I was 32, coming up to 33. Would I still be on the run at 43? 53? 63? Wayne was already in his fifties.

I think also our injuries made us stop and think as well. My bullet to the leg could have been so much worse. What if I needed significant medical attention? The state of Wayne and Alex's crash helmets also brought home another point. They both had several gouges where bullets had ripped through them. What if they hadn't been wearing the helmets? They'd be dead by now.

It didn't help that it rained for two days and we had to shelter inside tents stained with my blood. We couldn't even move on from where we were camping since the bikes needed recharging and we needed sunlight for that. We just lay inside our tents, listening to the rain and getting more depressed. I spent a lot of time thinking about my mum and how I'd probably never see her again now. I also spent a lot of time thinking about Liam and how much I still missed him. At one point, during the third wet night, I started to wonder what Liam would expect me to do. I knew what he'd want me to do, that was easy. He'd want me to stay safe, not go gallivanting round the countryside defying our Chinese invaders, but what would he expect me to do? It bothered me that I had no idea. How was it possible for me to live with a man, love a man, for several years and not know what he would think I would do in a bad situation? Would he expect me to do everything I could to stay safe or would he expect me to put myself at risk to help others in a similar situation? Would he expect that I'd be leading a little band of no-hopers or just be someone tagging along, tolerated but only just. I had no idea. I knew he loved me but I didn't know what he actually thought of me.

Things didn't look any brighter in the morning. Well, actually they did since the sun was shining and the sodden countryside started to dry out but it was still dark and raining in our souls. What were we going to do now? I had no idea. As far as I could tell we had two options. Go back to Sydney and give ourselves up or just drift along waiting for

the day when we'd be caught. It was only a matter of time after all. Where could I lead my little band of wanderers?

Ginny had been in and out of my tent, of course, checking on me and changing my bandages. The others had come in from time to time to bring me food and chat but it was on that fourth day that Ginny dragged me out into the sunshine.

"I know it hurts," she said, "but you need to start moving your leg or the muscles will atrophy."

I grumbled but she insisted so I ended up hobbling around for a while on a crude crutch fashioned by Marcie from an fallen branch. The others were up and about as well although both Wayne and Alex limped almost as much as I did.

"Are you ready for a sitrep?" asked Itch after Ginny allowed me to collapse onto the ground again, with my back propped against a tree.

"I suppose," I said. "What's a sitrep? Another one of Ginny's healing concoctions?"

"A situation report," said Itch humourlessly. She sat down beside me, her legs crossed.

"Oh," I said, matching her humourlessness. The last thing I wanted was someone telling me how bad a situation we were in. I already knew. "If you insist."

"We lost two motorcycles and have two remaining," she said, her organised mind not needing to check things off on her fingers, "both charging. We lost two guns, but have four remaining, all now fully charged. We have fifteen magazines, thirteen full and two partially full. We have approximately two days of fresh food, eleven days of canned and dried food and four days of water. We have approximately 800K of fuel in the van. One air bed has been punctured and we have one bar of soap left."

"Oh really?" I asked. "Whose?"

“Marcie's,” said Itch. “She dropped a knife on it.”

“That's a shame,” I said. “I suppose we'll have to get her another one. Umm, how is everyone?”

“Those with injuries I believe are progressing,” said Itch, “although Ginny would be a better person to ask. The rest of us are well.”

“No, I didn't mean that,” I said. “Umm, I meant, well, you know, how are you all feeling, morale.”

“Ahh,” said Itch. She went quiet for a few moments. “There has been some talk.”

“What sort of talk?” I asked.

“Concerns for the future,” she said. “We have been waiting for you to recover.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “I suppose we'd better have a meeting, then.”

“Shall I gather everyone here?” she asked.

“Would you?” I said. “I'm having difficulty getting up.”

It took a while to get everyone gathered. Alex and Wayne were nearby, resting in the sun like me but Marcie had apparently gone for a walk and Clark kept promising to join us but couldn't seem to tear himself away from his computer. Ginny made some more coffee and we more or less sat there silently until Marcie came back. Clark still wouldn't join us so Itch went and dragged him over.

“Sit,” she said as sternly as her breathless accent allowed her. Clark dropped to the ground and sat without looking up from the screen.

“Well, now,” I said, wondering how to broach the subject. “I gather there are some concerns about our future.”

They all looked down at the ground, except Clark who didn't seem to be listening.

“OK,” I said. “I confess I have concerns as well. I don't know what we should do now. Any thoughts?”

“Umm, I don't know, like, if we want to stay as a group,” said Wayne, hesitantly, “but I been wondering if maybe, like, umm, if we went up to Darwin or over to Perth we could, maybe, find a ship.”

“And go where?” I asked.

“Africa, maybe,” he said, “or the Middle East. Sure as hell we can't find a ship on the east coast. Too many Chinese.”

“That's an idea,” I said. “Anyone else?”

“Itch and I, well, we have had a thought,” said Alex.

“What's that?” I asked.

“It's more for just the two of us,” he said, looking over at Itch, “but there's no reason why the rest of you can't do the same.”

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“South Australia,” he said. “Disappear into the outback and take up farming. No one out there to bother us.”

“What about when the Fourteen Rivers Project gets down that far?” asked Marcie. “The outback will be full of Chinese then.”

“Nat,” said Clark, without looking up.

“It'll be years before that happens,” said Alex.

“Nat,” said Clark. This time he looked up.

“Yes, Clark?” I asked. “Where do you want to go?”

“What?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“We're talking about what to do and where to go,” I said. “Where do

you want to go?”

“Couldn't give a shit,” he said. “Anywhere where there aren't many people. I don't like people much. You know I sent out that picture of Bram?”

“I'd rather not talk about Bram,” I said. “I'm depressed enough already.”

“Yeah, right,” he said. “Only I've had a reply. I think you ought to know.”

“Oh, all right then,” I said. “Who's it from?”

“Someone I know,” he said. “JJW24.”

“Is that his name?” I asked.

“Nah,” said Clark, “just a handle. Don't know his name. Don't even know if he's a he but I think he's Korean.”

“JJW24 doesn't sound Korean,” said Itch.

“Actually that's why I think he's Korean,” said Clark. “JJW is the first letters of Jineunghyeong Jisogjeog Wihyeob which is Korean for Advanced Persistent Threat which is a hacker term for a long term stealth infiltration of a computer system. And 24 is the year the North Koreans invaded South Korea and merged with China.”

“So JJW24 is one of your hacker friends?” asked Ginny.

“Yeah,” said Clark.

“So how does he or she know Bram?” I asked.

“He doesn't,” said Clark, “but he says here his government has a file on someone who's a high up member of ACT NOW! who has the same face. Do you want to know the rest of it?”

There were several yeses and nods so I said “Yes” as well.

“According to the file,” said Clark, “Bram Tanner used to be Bernard Talbot. In 2017 he tried to get selected for the seat of Dickson in Queensland but was considered too right wing so he ran as an independent in 2019 and 2022. He got a couple of hundred votes each time.”

“Right wing?” said Alex. “You said right wing?”

“Yeah,” said Clark.

“How come a far right wing politician wannabe got involved with an anti right wing resistance movement?” asked Alex. “That doesn't make sense.”

“Stop,” I said, holding up my hand. “What are you talking about?”

“The Chinese,” he said. “They're a totalitarian fascist type government that's so left wing they've ended up extreme right. I would have thought an extremist right winger would support them not fight them.”

“Ohh,” I said. “Now I understand. Clark?”

“Says here,” said Clark, “That he was a founding member of ACT NOW! and is one of the three leaders, but here's the interesting bit. According to this file ACT NOW! merged with factions of NSW For Liberty, Queensland Blackbirders and Get The Slanties Out Of Victoria back in February this year in order to set up a lobby group to bring political pressure against the Chinese government in Australia. They haven't made any serious attempt at resistance or subversion for years.”

“OK,” I said. “Well, I'm sure that's very interesting but I don't quite see ...”

“The file also says,” said Clark, his glasses flashing at me, “that those groups had a lot of people join in the first three or four years after the invasion but membership and donations have been dropping off because of the lack of action and since the merger they've plummeted. It seems the lobby group, which is also called ACT NOW!, has very little credibility either with the government or with the people. Seems

questions are also being asked about big holes in the group's finances. They had hundreds of millions in donations but haven't spent much and there's very little left. No one seems to know where the money's gone."

"Oh shit," said Wayne, with feeling. "Now I get it. Jesus."

"Get what?" I said, feeling completely lost. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Bram," said Wayne. "Sounds like he's fucked up trying to be a polliie so he jumped on to a resistance group when the Chinese came along and is trying to be a polliie again. I betcha he's the one driving the lobby group. Wouldn't surprise me if him and the other leaders have creamed off the cash as well. All them polliies are a bunch of crooks, bin saying that for years."

"I still don't get it," I said.

"What it sounds like," said Alex, "is that this Bram and probably some of his mates, jumped on the resistance bandwagon when the Chinese invaded to get their hands on power and money. Once they got it they started to change the resistance over to the right and align with the Chinese. I bet their lobby group allies with the Chinese, not fights them."

"So you're saying Bram is one of them?" I asked, incredulous.

"Well, he's not Chinese," said Alex, "but I bet he supports their ideology."

"Wow," I said. "Like ... wow!"

"There's a whole bunch of other stuff," said Clark. "They've got everything here, going back to his grades in school and who he slept with at uni and shit. He got done for drink driving back in 2014, lost his licence for a year."

I started to laugh.

“What are you laughing at?” asked Clark.

“I’m sorry,” I said, wiping my eyes. “It’s just that Bram said something to me at that lake. It just seems totally absurd.”

“What’d he say?” asked Marcie.

“He said Clark’s a waste of time as a hacker,” I said. “He said he couldn’t hack his way out of a paper bag and yet he’s got Bram’s entire life story. I just find that so funny.”

“Did he?” said Clark, looking at me intently. “Did he really?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have told you. He was quite insulting actually, about all of us, not just Clark.”

“That is, like, so totally awesome!” said Clark, his normally deadly serious face breaking into a wide grin. “Woah! Cool-ies!” and he banged his hand on the ground.

“You don’t seem that upset?” I said.

“I’m not,” he said. “It’s great! It means that tosser actually fell for it!”

“You’ve lost me again,” I said. “Fell for what?”

“OK,” he said, his grin disappearing as he turned serious again. “Listen, I’m not big noting myself here, but I’m, like, one of the thirty or forty top hackers in the world, OK. We all know each other and get together online.”

“OK,” I said. “I believe you.”

“Well, like, I wasn’t always,” he continued. “I started back when I was seven, with those crappy little things they gave us at school. I didn’t know shit but I was going into hacking forums and stuff and eventually found out how many stupid mistakes I’d been making so I changed my handle for the serious stuff. Thing is, I kept my old handle going and made sure I got known as a script kiddie, you know, someone who can only do stuff if someone else has written the code

for them. I thought it would be a good cover and it worked. It freaking worked! Sweet as!"

"So you mean Bram knows about you under your old handle not your new one?" I asked, wishing I could go back to my old straightforward life in fashion retail.

"Yeah," said Clark. "Cool, isn't it."

"Can I say something?" asked Ginny, holding up her hand.

"Sure," I said, taken aback because Ginny never spoke at our meetings.

"I don't like any of this," she said. "I don't want to go to Africa or the Middle East and I don't want to go farming in the outback. I don't like the Chinese running our country and I hate that a horrible person like Bram would insult any of us let alone all of us."

"OK," I said. "I know how you feel, but what are you suggesting?"

"Well," she said, "I don't really have any ideas but aren't we being as bad as Bram and his friends? Aren't we really just the same?"

"Umm, how do you mean?" I asked, noticing the others listening intently. "I don't see that we're the same at all."

"Ohh, I'm not good at explaining myself," she said, sighing in frustration, "but we steal things from other people and we may not have followers but we're following ourselves if you see what I mean, but we don't actually do anything, do we. We complain about the Chinese but we're not doing anything about them. Doesn't that basically make us the same as Bram and ACT NOW!?"

"I suppose," I said in some surprise, "if you want to look at it in that way. But what are you getting at?"

"We're doomed," she said simply. "I've been thinking about it and I can't see any way out. Either we turn ourselves in or we hang about in the bush waiting to get caught but either way we're doomed. We'll end

up back on the Projects or dead so why don't we do something positive before that happens?"

"Sounds great," I said, "but what sort of positive? What can we do?"

"Ohh, I don't know," she said, almost in tears. Marcie reached out and took her hand but Ginny threw it away. "I know I'm fairly useless, but it just seems to me, I don't know, I just think we should do something. Something positive instead of sitting round moaning. Make a statement, something bold, you know? Strike a blow for freedom or something while we still can."

Chapter Twenty Three

"I'm sorry, Ginny," I said, easing my leg and giving it a gentle rub. "Do you have any more of those anti-inflammatories? My leg's killing me and I think the pain is affecting my hearing. Did you just say 'strike a blow for freedom'?"

"Yeah, here you go," she said, tossing over a packet. "Don't take more than two though."

"Thanks," I said.

I pushed two out of their little tin foil bubbles and swallowed them with a swig of cool coffee.

"Now then," I said, putting my mug down on the ground beside me. "What was it you actually said?"

"I said strike a blow for freedom," said Ginny, half defiantly as though she was a little ashamed to have said such a thing. "Or something. I just think, oh, I don't know, we should at least try and do something. After all, we're all here and not in the Project. If we just sit around waiting to be caught and sent back it'll be such a waste. At least let's get sent there for something worthwhile."

"Nice idea," I said, "but look at us. Seven people living in the woods, three with injuries and we've next to nothing apart from a van and a handful of guns. What can we possibly do when the likes of ACT NOW! with all their resources haven't been able to do much."

Alex leaned over gingerly, took the packet of anti-inflammatories and popped a couple himself. The others, apart from Clark, looked off into the distance or plucked blades of grass. Clark was doing things on his computer and seemingly not listening.

"Bollocks," said Wayne suddenly. He leaned forward so his back wasn't resting against a tree and cradled his heavily strapped wrist in his lap. "You heard what Clarkie boy said. ACT NOW! are embezzling the dosh and playing at being politicians. They don't want to do anything that'll upset things. They want the Chinese to stay here so

they can make out they're powerful important people and keep on creaming off money. They're doing it for themselves, not for us, for the Aussies."

"I agree," said Alex.

"Who with?" I asked.

"All of you," he said with a grin.

"That's helpful," I said.

He laughed. "You're part right," he said. "We haven't got much going for us. Wayne's right, ACT NOW! and the others are just tossers in it for themselves and Ginny's right. If we just sit here we're wasting our time and our selves. Isn't it better to be doing something rather than nothing?"

"Yeah!" said Marcie vehemently, leaning forward and hitting the ground with her hand. "Sitting round waiting for the axe to fall is for losers. I don't wanna do that. I'm the youngest here, well, me and Clark, and I don't wanna spend the rest of me life on the Project. Might as well be hung for a something rather than a something else or whatever it bloody is."

"A sheep and a lamb," I said. "Although I never really understood that expression."

"Actually I think it is a very relevant expression," said Itch. "Certainly for you Australians who were sent here as convicts."

"You're going to have to explain that one, love," said Wayne. "We ain't all professors, like."

"I am not a professor," said Itch. "I am merely a former student although I was an assistant lecturer in the faculty for two years."

"Yeah, that's great," I said hurriedly as Itch could be touchy about her academic background sometimes. "But the sheep lamb thing?"

She raised an eyebrow. "It refers to a former legal situation in England," she said after a few moments. "I forget how much it was but if someone was convicted of stealing goods valued at more than that amount they were automatically transported to Australia. I think it might have been twenty shillings. Irrespective, if a lamb was valued at, hypothetically, 25 shillings and a sheep at 100 shillings then it made sense to steal the sheep as it was a greater return for the same risk."

"Oh, right," I said, "that makes sense but why hung? Shouldn't the saying be transported?"

"I think the law pre-dated the deporting of convicts to Australia," said Itch. "Most likely before that the convicted criminal was hung."

"You're straying from Marcie's point," said Alex. "It doesn't matter what they used to do in England. Marcie is saying that we're going to the Project either way so we might as well try and do something first. Make some sort of statement, like Ginny said."

I was about to remark that some or all of us might not get sent to the Project, we might get executed instead but decided not to. It seemed unnecessarily negative somehow.

"OK," I said. "Shall we take a vote on doing something? Raise your hand if you agree."

Five hands went up. The exceptions being me and Clark. Marcie slapped Clark on the knee and he looked up, saw the others with their hands raised and raised his briefly as well before going back to his computer. I raised mine as well, just for solidarity.

"That's pretty unanimous," I said. Actually, the mere act of putting up my hand had made me feel a little more cheerful. If nothing else, we were all in agreement even if it was pointless. "So, what shall we do?"

Again there was silence and two or three wrinkled faces as people thought.

"Ginny?" I asked. "Any ideas?"

“Umm,” she said. “I’m not really an action sort of person. I’m much better if someone tells me what to do.”

“Why don’t we assassinate what’s his name,” said Marcie, looking enthusiastic. “You know, that Chinese guy who’s in charge.”

“You mean Li Hong, the Governor of Australia?” asked Alex.

“Yeah, him,” she said. “All we need is a gun and we’ve got four of them.”

“We wouldn’t stand a chance,” I said. “He’ll have hundreds of bodyguards and security checks and stuff. We’d never get near him.”

“Wouldn’t make any difference, anyhow,” said Wayne. “They’d just make someone else Governor right away. There’s probably a Deputy Governor just in case.”

“True,” I said. “It would be nice if we could do something that actually made a difference.”

“Well who’s the big cheese in China, then?” said Marcie. “Couldn’t we assassinate him instead?”

“Same problem,” said Wayne, “and we’d never be able to get to China anyway. At least we can drive to Canberra.”

“So blow something up then,” said Marcie. “Like The Opera House or Sydney Harbour Bridge.”

“How?” I asked. “We have no explosives. I doubt anyone even knows how to use them. Wayne?”

“Not me, love,” he said, shaking his head. “I never went in for that sort of stuff.”

“Besides,” I said, “how would that affect the Chinese? I doubt they would care in the slightest unless Li Hong happens to like going to the Opera House.”

“What did I just vote for?” whispered Clark to Alex who was sitting the other side of him.

“Doing something,” whispered back Alex.

“Right,” whispered Clark and went back to his computer.

“And if we did find some explosives and managed not to blow ourselves up,” I continued, “and did blow up the Harbour Bridge it would be major bad news for the Aussies who were on it at the time or use it to go to work or whatever. If we’re going to do something I’d much rather it was against the Chinese not the Aussies.”

“What about a bank, then?” asked Ginny. “Couldn’t we blow up the Reserve Bank and wreck the Chinese economy?”

“Same problem,” I said, “no explosives and it probably wouldn’t affect the economy for the Chinese but it would be very disruptive for the Aussies. This is what I was trying to get at earlier. We have virtually no resources and even if we did we’re in Australia. Anything we might be able to do would affect the Australians more than the Chinese.”

“How about the Chinese Military Headquarters in Australia, then?” asked Ginny.

No one bothered to point out the possible difficulties there.

“I’ve never told anyone this,” said Alex when the penny dropped for Ginny and she turned red in embarrassment at suggesting the seven of us attacked a major army base, “but I used to be a management trainee. I hated it so much I decided to follow my hobby and become a professional magician.”

I poked my leg to see if it still hurt. It did.

“I lasted almost three months,” continued Alex when it became apparent that no one else was going to comment on his revelation. “It was boring as anything and seemed completely irrelevant but one thing did stick in my mind from the course the company sent me on. It actually turned out to be useful for magic as well.”

“What was that?” I asked, wondering why we were talking about management courses.

“It's pretty simple really,” he said. “When you've got a problem you can't solve, change it.”

“You mean, like, we can't figure out what to do to strike a blow for freedom so let's decide what to have for dinner instead?” I asked. It was only after I'd said that that I realised that it sounded sarcastic.

“No, not really,” said Alex. “What I meant was if you can't see a solution to the problem, break the problem down into smaller problems. Several things have been suggested for what we could do and there'll always be twenty seven reasons why we can't do any of them so why not simply think of something that will impact the Chinese and not impact the Aussies without worrying about whether it's possible. Once that choice is made we can then break the problem of how to do it down into smaller problems, many of which we can do quite easily. Then we can figure out how to solve the smaller problems that we can't obviously do. Like, let's suppose we decide to destroy the Sydney Harbour Bridge. We can then break that down into smaller problems. Umm, well, for example, how do we get there, how do we destroy it, how do we get away afterwards. Getting there and getting away aren't too hard so we concentrate on how do we actually destroy it. OK, blow it up. The problem then breaks down into where do we get explosives, how do we set them off, where do we put them and so on. Once we have some explosives, the problem of where to put them shouldn't be too hard. Do you see what I mean?”

“Actually, he's right,” said Clark suddenly. “It's called top down design and we do it a lot in programming. You break the problem down into smaller and smaller sub-problems until they're all easy to solve then bolt it all back together. The trick is to say 'here's the problem, what resources do I need?' rather than 'these are the resources I have, what problems can I solve?’”

“So what are you saying?” I asked, feeling confused.

“Let's decide on a target,” said Alex, “without worrying about how. Once we have a target we can then work out how to deal with it.”

“OK,” I said. “So what target shall we choose, even though we’ve only got a van, two bikes and four guns? The Chinese Military HQ?”

“Actually, we’ve got a tank as well,” said Wayne thoughtfully.

“No!” exclaimed Alex. “You’re doing it wrong! You’re still thinking about resources. Decide on the problem then think about resources later.”

“What tank?” I asked, ignoring Alex.

“That one we found in the forest,” he said. “Just after we escaped from the Air Base.”

“But it doesn’t work,” I said, “and anyway, none of us knows how to drive a tank.”

“The batteries were flat,” said Wayne, “and if we charge it we might be able to get it working again and how hard can a tank be to drive? They’re designed for idiots to operate under fire.”

“That’s better,” said Alex. “Break the problem down into parts.”

“Speaking of parts,” I said, “what if it needs parts? We don’t have any tank parts.”

“We might be able to find some, somewhere,” he said. “After all, we nick everything else we need. Or we might be able to figure out a way round it. Like if your fan belt breaks in the middle of nowhere, you can use some cloth or a piece of leather instead.”

“A tank would be pretty cool,” said Marcie. “Can I drive it?”

“We don’t even know where it is,” I said. “What if we can’t find it again or the Chinese have found it and taken it away?”

“Then we are no worse off than we are now,” said Itch, “but wouldn’t it be a good idea to go and see? After all, it is electric and electrical equipment is fairly straightforward as there are only three parts. A power source, wires and the device itself. We can probably fix the

problem if it is the power source or the wires and we might be able to even fix the device if it's not a chip problem. Even if it is a chip we might be able to rig up some alternative."

"But where is this tank?" I asked. "Are we really striking a blow for freedom if we spend the next twenty years looking for it?"

"I wish I'd never said that," said Ginny. "You're never going to let me forget it, are you?"

"Strike a blow for freedom?" I asked. "No way, that's going to be our rallying cry from now on."

"Great," she said sourly.

"I think I remember where it is," said Marcie. "I was driving, after all. We got out of the Air Base and headed for Lake Burragorang. We crossed a bridge and went down a dirt road."

"No we didn't," said Ginny. "We went over the dam and down a B road then we turned onto a dirt track."

"Are you sure?" asked Marcie. "I could've sworn it was a bridge."

"The bridge was in town," said Ginny. "I was navigating. It was a dam."

"Didn't we turn off the dirt road onto a track in the woods?" asked Alex.

"The tank was beside the lake," said Itch, "and hidden. If it was on a dirt track someone would have found it."

"So how are we going to find it?" I asked.

"We find the dam and the lake," said Wayne. "We'll find the damned tank even if we have to walk all the way around the bloody lake."

"You see?" said Alex happily. "Break down the problem into smaller parts."

“The problem isn't finding the tank,” I said patiently, “although it's going to be a problem finding the tank. The problem is what are we going to target to strike a blow for freedom?”

“What target?” asked Clark, looking up.

“Oh Jesus,” I said. “I can't be doing with this. My leg hurts.”

“Nat is obsessed with striking a blow for freedom,” said Ginny. “I didn't mean it. I was just saying we ought to do something before we get caught and sent to the Project.”

“I'm confused,” said Clark. “Are we going back to the Project?”

“No,” I said, “although at this rate it would be a lot easier.”

“Oh,” said Clark. He frowned and looked at his computer then looked up again. “What are we talking about?”

“Nat wants to attack and destroy something that will affect the Chinese but not the Australians,” said Itch. “Not something like the Sydney Opera House or the Governor of Australia.”

“Oh,” said Clark. “Gotcha.”

“How about an electricity generating plant?” said Alex. “In Canberra. One that lights the houses and offices of the Chinese.”

“I suppose it's possible,” I said. “Although how are we going to find out which power station feeds their houses? Won't it affect a lot of Aussie businesses as well?”

“A coal mine would be easier,” said Wayne. “They're isolated and a lot of power stations still run off coal.”

“Or a wind generator,” said Ginny. “I know there's one in Victoria.”

“Or a port,” said Itch. “We could interrupt the Chinese supply chain.”

“Oh come on!” I said. “I don't care what Alex said about breaking

down the problem. How on earth are the seven of us going to seriously affect shipping? Even if we did manage to damage a port won't they just switch to another port and use trucks or trains to move the stuff instead? And what about all the Australians who work at the port? We might injure or kill a lot of them and put the rest out of work."

"Why not do something that would benefit Australians?" said Clark, looking up from his computer again.

"That's what we're trying to think of," I said. "Not very successfully. Everything that might disrupt the Chinese will impact the Aussies even worse and they'll probably have it sorted in a day or two anyway. Like assassination."

"Oh," said Clark. He looked down at his computer then put it on the ground beside him. "How about a data centre?"

"A data centre?" I asked. "What sort of data centre?"

"The central data centre for the Australian surveillance system is in Sydney," he said. "Take that out and you'll take out the whole of the surveillance system."

"Surely it's not all in one place?" asked Itch.

"Well, no," said Clark. "The cameras and microphones feed into local data centres where the trivial processing takes place, like empty streets and so on. Anything of any interest, including face recognition and identification, gets sent to the central hub for processing. Take that out and no one will be identified."

"How come you and your hacker friends haven't already done that?" asked Wayne.

"We've been trying for years," said Clark. "The security's too good but we've never tried to blow it up."

"Don't they have backups?" I asked. "I thought you computer geeks were fanatical about backups."

“Sure they do,” he said, “and they have four off-site backup centres, but they only backup historical data not future data. Take out the central data hub and there's nothing recorded to backup.”

“Oh,” I said, blinking in surprise. “And that couldn't harm any Australians, could it?”

“Difficult to see how,” he said, “so long as there are no reprisals.”

“Ahh,” I said. “How could we prevent that?”

“We can't,” said Clark.

“Actually, we might be able to,” said Itch. “If it was clear to everyone that it was us then there's not a lot of point in punishing the rest, They'd lose what goodwill they have. Politically it would be bad.”

“But couldn't they just build another data centre?” asked Marcie.

“Sure,” said Clark, “but it would take a long time. The data centre has somewhere around a hundred thousand processors linked in parallel and over a quarter of a million hard drives. It would take months to replace them and months more to rewire and test. It could be out of action for six months, maybe more if there is a supply shortage.”

“Is this place guarded?” I asked. “Wouldn't they have like a whole regiment there if it's so important?”

“I doubt it,” said Clark. “All the attacks are online computer based attacks. Even if we only took out the environmental control system it would put it out of operation for a week or more.”

“Environmental control?” I asked. “You mean like air conditioning? Are there people inside?”

“There might be a technician inside,” conceded Clark, “although it'll be a Chinese since they wouldn't ever trust an Aussie. No, the environmental control is for temperature, humidity and dust for the computers. They have to operate in a perfectly controlled environment or there may be data errors.”

“So, like, what you're saying,” I said slowly, “is that we could attack a building with no one in it and even if we didn't destroy it, just damaged it a little, the surveillance system could be out of action for anywhere from a week to six months?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Cool, isn't it.”

“For the whole of Australia?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “It's linked back to one of the mainland hubs, I think in Guangdong, but I don't see that being affected. Maybe if we could get a virus on there, but we can't.”

“And if they know we did it,” I continued, the enormity and audacity of the idea growing in my head, “there wouldn't be any repercussions on innocent Aussies?”

“Can't promise that,” he said, “but it wouldn't be any worse than assassinating the Governor or anything else and, as Itch says, it would backfire on them politically. The Aussies are pretty docile but widespread reprisals could change that.”

“So how could we make sure they know it's us?” I asked, “and how do we escape getting killed?”

“Oh, easy,” he said. “We live stream the attack and hold up signs or something. Then we disappear into the mountains like we always do.”

“Wow,” I said. “Like, wow! So, everyone, what do you reckon? Shall we do this? Strike a blow for freedom at the very heart of Chinese totalitarianism?”

Everyone put up their hands, including me.

“Awesome,” I said. “So we go find this tank, get it working then go attack this centre.”

Everyone looked a lot more cheerful and positive now that we had a project to work on.

“Oh, one more thing,” I said. “What day is it?”

“Sunday,” said Ginny. “The last Sunday before Christmas, actually.”

“OK,” I said. “We’ll go find this tank tomorrow, before the tourists come out for the school holidays. Oh, Clark, where exactly in Sydney is this data centre?”

“No idea,” he said. “Could be anywhere.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Ginny had turned out to be quite a surprise. On the surface she seemed a bit of a ditherer, emotional and ill equipped to be a camper let alone an escaped convict. It would be easy to believe that she might have been a bit of a drama queen in her former life. Underneath, though, there was someone quite different. Perhaps it was her conformist Italian Catholic upbringing that had built that facade around her. But if, as she so often said, you gave her a task she would do it, uncomplainingly and unswervingly. Very early on, as she had been a cook in an Aged Care facility, she ended up doing all our cooking and never once did she complain, even when we found maggots in a piece of meat that had been sitting round a day or two too long. She also got lumped with being our medic for the simple reason that she cared more than the rest of us. The guys, in particular, were macho about minor injuries but Ginny insisted that she cleaned and tended everything. Perhaps she had a strong mothering instinct. Certainly she did most of the caring for Clark after he'd been beaten.

So, when she discovered I'd been shot she seemed to know what to do. She put a tourniquet around my leg and organised the robbery of the pharmacy and, when we'd found somewhere reasonable to camp, she went on the net and found out how to treat gunshot wounds. More importantly, she didn't flinch when it came to that treatment, which is more than I can say for myself. Twice a day she cleaned and inspected both ends of the wound then packed antiseptic soaked gauze as deeply inside each end as she could even though she knew it was very very painful. I cursed her between agonised sobs but she insisted and, incredibly, I didn't get any infections. On the day we went looking for the tank, the fourth after my being shot, my leg was very sore and badly bruised but the swelling was starting to go down and there was no unpleasant smell. Wayne seemed to think it was because the bullet had been fired from an electric gun so there were no traces of nasty chemicals on it that you would get from a normal gun with a cartridge full of exploding gunpowder but I'm convinced it was because of Ginny's diligence.

It was that diligence that meant we didn't get an early start. Ginny insisted that she tend my leg and Alex's leg and shoulder before we left which took a while, especially as I was white faced and shaking

afterwards and we had to wait until I had calmed down enough to make it to the van and lie on the packed tents and bedding. We found the dam easily enough as it was clearly marked on the map and the B road the other side was still there. The problem was that we'd last been there three or four months previously and the faint track we had gone down was no longer there. Nature cared nothing for the affairs of humanity and everything that could grow had grown and plenty of things had died and the weather had had its effect and that was the end of it. No track.

We tried looking for gaps in the trees big enough for the van and for broken branches but there were gaps and broken branches everywhere so we quickly gave up. We went back to the picnic area beside the dam and pretended to be tourists while Marcie and Itch went for a walk along the edge of the lake. Clearly the three walking wounded couldn't go and Clark needed to sleep as he'd been up playing on his computer much of the night, only stopping when its battery ran out. Marcie and Itch were to follow the water's edge and leave a pile of stones on the bank as a marker if they found the tank. If not, they were to come back after two hours. Either way they were under strict instructions to return the same way as we couldn't risk them getting lost in the woods. The rest of us would devise a way of getting the van through to the tank while they were gone.

You'd think in this day of satellites and GPS it would be easy. Someone stands beside the tank with a phone and we use GPS on another phone in the van to find the first phone. Sadly we couldn't. Because the phones didn't have usable phone numbers we couldn't track one using GPS. So, when Itch and Marcie came hurrying back to tell us they'd found the tank we did the only thing we could.

Alex drove the van, leaving it in first gear and and searching for gaps in the trees. The four who could walk spread out between the van and the lake, making sure that they could see whoever was to the left and right at all times. That way, with Wayne in the passenger seat keeping Alex always not too far from the walkers, we slowly found a way through the trees without getting hopelessly lost. Several times Alex had to back up and find a different path but, with night beginning to fall, we eventually parked the van not far from the tank. Marcie and Clark then followed the edge of the lake all the way back again and

drove the bikes down the track created by the van. It was laborious but, in a day or two when the undergrowth recovered, we'd be completely isolated. Getting back out was less of a problem, head east and sooner or later we'd pick up the B road.

It was too late to inspect the tank, beyond confirming that it was still there, so while Marcie and Clark fetched the bikes and the others set up camp, Ginny worked on my leg by the van's interior lights and pronounced it 'healing nicely'. She then organised some food and we all went to bed, except Clark, who'd recharged his computer while we waited at the dam.

"I have good news and bad," said Itch the next day.

She and Wayne had gone to play with the tank when it was light enough and fiddled with it for a good couple of hours. Marcie had gone with them out of idle curiosity and Ginny did her thing with me and Alex before going to do some washing in the lake. Clarke was sound asleep.

"Tell me the good news first," I said, my leg still throbbing from Ginny's ministrations. I wasn't in the mood for bad news just yet.

"The Chinese have the same plugs and voltage as Australia," said Itch, "and we found a compartment with a length of cable for recharging the battery from a domestic outlet. Undoubtedly they have high speed chargers wherever their base is but it seems they carry the cable to top up where convenient."

"So that means we can recharge it from our solar panels?" I asked.

"Yes," said Itch, "and I can't begin to troubleshoot its systems until we have some power. Then I can see what is working and what isn't."

"That makes sense," I said. I picked up my mug and had a sip or two of coffee. "Have you both had some breakfast?"

"Yes," said Itch, "and we have left the battery charging."

"OK, then," I said, with a sigh. "What's the bad news?"

“I found a plate on the side of the battery,” she said. “It had the manufacturer’s serial numbers and so on on it.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad to me,” I said, “unless it’s an Australian made battery.”

“No, it is Chinese,” she said. “It seems the battery is rated at one megawatt.”

“Is that bad?” I asked.

“For the tank, no,” she said. “It needs a high powered battery to drive its motors and power the weapon system but it is not good for us as we only have 200 watt solar panels to recharge from.”

“You’ve lost me already,” I said.

“If we connect the four panels together in parallel then we will have 800 watts of charging input,” she said. “To charge a megawatt battery from that will take 1250 hours which, if we assume eight hours of good sunlight per day means the battery will take a hundred and fifty six days to charge.”

“Ahh,” I said, “That’s, what, six months?”

“Just over five,” she said, “and that’s assuming we don’t have any cloudy days. Realistically, even though it is summer now we will have some cloudy days and we will need to disconnect a panel now and then to recharge the bikes, phones and computer.”

“Oh,” I said and blinked at her a few times. “So basically you’re saying that the whole idea is dead in the water already.”

“Not at all,” she said. “Assuming that whatever issue the tank has can be resolved, you need to be aware of the timescale. We can speed it up, however.”

“Well, that sound’s better,” I said. “How?”

“More panels,” she said. “If we have more panels we can reduce the

recharge time. Double the number of panels will halve the time.”

“OK,” I said, “I guess we can get hold of some more although we can't have too many. If we lay out fifty panels it'll be obvious to anyone flying overhead and someone will come to investigate.”

“Very true,” she said. “There is another point, however, which may be good or bad depending on what you want.”

“I'm not sure I like the sound of that,” I said.

She shrugged as if it didn't matter whether I liked it or not.

“Assuming that this is a typical battery,” she said, “then it will start to charge quickly then get slower as it fills.

“So what does that mean?” I asked.

“Typically,” said Itch, “a battery is 80% charged after half the recharging time. The closer it gets to 100% the longer it takes.”

“So ...?” I asked.

“So if you desire to have it fully charged it will take one hundred and fifty six days with our present panels,” she said. “If 80% charge will be sufficient then that will reduce to seventy eight days. Fewer with more panels. If we could connect to a 20 amp domestic supply we could reduce it still further, down to seven days, assuming twenty fours hours of charging per day.”

“I think someone might get a little upset if we parked a tank outside their house for a week,” I said, “particularly if we took all their power.”

“Indeed,” she said, “but there may be a deserted house in the vicinity with electricity still connected.”

“I think the power company would notice if that much power started being used,” I said. “Anyway, it might not be an issue. When do you think it will be charged enough to start trying to find out what's

wrong?”

“Perhaps tomorrow,” she said. “We have left it charging from three panels so that should give it four kilowatts or so which should be enough for testing purposes. I assume you want the bikes charged from the fourth?”

“Definitely,” I said. “Whatever happens we need to be able to move quickly if we have to. That goes for getting more panels as well. If you think you can fix it then we'll get some more but I don't see any point in risking it if you can't.”

“Agreed,” she said. “How is your leg today?”

“Definitely improving,” I said, “but Ginny thinks it could take a while. She found a study online which said that recovery from simple gunshot wounds typically takes fifteen to a hundred and fifty days. I don't know that the word 'typically' means a lot though with that kind of range.”

“Perhaps not,” she said, “but if it takes a hundred and fifty in your case then we should have the battery almost fully recharged.”

“We can't stay here that long,” I said. “A few weeks perhaps but six months? No way.”

* * *

Clark emerged from his tent not long after the sun had passed its peak. He squatted beside Ginny while she made him a cup of tea, polishing his glasses on his t-shirt and glowering around him. I didn't take much notice as he wasn't at his best first thing. He thanked her when she passed it to him then put on his glasses and glowered some more, probably because he was long sighted and his glasses would have made the world out of focus. Then again, as I had a suspicion his mind saw the world out of focus anyway, perhaps the glasses helped. Or perhaps not, as he grunted and shoved the glasses on top of his head where they got smeared again from the grease in his hair. I went back to dozing and mentally encouraging my leg to heal while Ginny set aside the rest of the boiled water to cool for my evening bout of

torture.

“Where's Marcie?” I asked after a while.

“She's gone fishing,” said Ginny. “She said she was feeling lucky.”

“Great,” I said.

When you've been camping with the same people for several months conversations tend to become banal and short. Marcie often went fishing and rarely caught anything. I let my mind drift again, not really thinking about anything. It was warm and sunny, nice recharging weather although it was a touch humid.

“Hey,” said Clark, shifting over a metre or so to talk to me. It seemed unnecessary but Clark liked to get just inside that personal space border when he wanted to talk.

“Hey, Clark,” I said drowsily. “Sleep well?”

“I guess,” he said and slurped his tea noisily.

I nodded and waited. He obviously had something to say, otherwise he'd have stayed where he was, but encouraging him usually didn't work. He slurped some more tea.

“I found that place last night,” he said, looking through the trees at what little we could see of the lake.

“What place?” I asked lazily, my mind still some way distant.

“That data centre place,” he said, “you remember?”

My mind jolted back into my head with a reverberation that made my leg flinch.

“Oh really?” I said, looking over. “Where is it?”

“About 40K away,” he said. “A place called St Mary's. Between Penrith and Parramatta.”

“40K,” I said, thoughtfully although there wasn't a lot to think about. 40K is 40K. “Did you find out anything else?”

“I found a satellite picture,” he said, “but my battery died before I could download it. It's on an industrial estate.”

“Oh,” I said. “For some reason I expected it to be more in a deserted part of the countryside. Are you sure it's the right place?”

“90%,” he said, slurping some more tea. “I'll do some checking later when I've charged the 'puter again. Just thought I'd tell you.”

“And I appreciate it,” I said, giving him a warm smile. I'd learnt that if he felt he wasn't appreciated he could become cold and uncooperative. “An industrial estate, hey?”

“Yup,” he said. “Where are the panels?”

“Itch is using them to charge the tank,” I said.

“Right,” he said, nodding. “Could take a while. Be OK if I used one to charge my 'puter?”

“She's only using three,” I said. “The other's charging one of the bikes. You can use that.”

“Sweet as,” he said and didn't move.

“I don't suppose the industrial estate is surrounded by farms?” I asked after a minute or so.

“Nah,” he said, staring into his mug. He fished something out with his finger and stared closely at it before flicking it away. “It's a pretty big estate, surrounded by houses. Catch you later.”

He tossed the rest of his tea into the bushes and got up. He looked around rather aimlessly for a few moments then went to get his computer from his tent. He liked to sleep with it as well.

I sighed and flexed my leg. It hurt. It always did but I had a funny

feeling it didn't hurt quite as much.

“So how the hell do we get a tank through a residential area and into an industrial estate without anyone noticing?” I wondered. “How do you even drive a tank? How do you see out?”

I leaned forward and rolled onto my hip then hoisted myself onto my good leg, the bad one sticking stiffly out in front of me. If I didn't try to bend it, which I couldn't much anyway because of the bandages, I could hobble round slowly. Going from tree to tree I made my way down to the edge of the lake.

It was even more beautiful than I remembered. The water was crystal clear and the crags and forests on the other side were almost perfectly reflected. There was a slight rippling of the water's surface in the gentle breeze which made the reflections shiver slightly. A couple of small fluffy white clouds hung in the blue sky and a solitary bird, high up, made its way without seeming to move its wings.

Marcie was sitting on a rock a little way further along the shore. Her legs were crossed and she looked to be miles away, lost in her own world. The fishing rod lay on the rock beside her, its line dangling in the water. Between her and me lay Alex, wearing only a pair of shorts. His feet were in the water and the scabs on his leg were livid.

“Hey,” he said, opening one eye. “How's it going?”

“OK,” I said, slowly hobbling over. “Wanted to ask you something.”

“No sweat,” he said.

I used a small tree to lower myself to the ground and sat there for a few moments recovering from the effort.

“You're good at misdirecting attention,” I said. “Here's one for you. How do we drive a tank through the streets without anyone noticing? Can you use your magic to make it invisible?”

“Easy,” he said. “Make it look like something they expect to see. Has Itch got it working then?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “She said she can't even start to look at it until it's charged up a bit. Maybe tomorrow. I was just wondering, if she can fix it, how we're going to drive it around without the cops and the Chinese swarming all over us. So how do we make it what they expect to see?”

“It's just a matter of the right camouflage,” he said, pursing his lips. “Let me think about it.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Wayne wandered over to see me the next day. I was just at the start of what turned out to be an excruciating session with Ginny and he stayed to watch, which made it worse.

"There's a little pus oozing out of your wound," she told me. "From both ends."

"Does that mean it's infected?" I asked anxiously. Aside from the pain and suffering I didn't want Ginny to have to attempt a field amputation. All we had were a couple of sheath knives, a machete and some anti-inflammatories, paracetamol and antiseptic. "It's not hurting as much as it was."

"It doesn't smell," she said, sniffing the exit wound in the front of my thigh. "I think it's what they call laudable pus, although I don't really know what that means."

"It's probably from the burning," Wayne said, bending over to have a look himself. He prodded my leg and I swiped ineffectually at his hand.

"What burning?" I asked, irritated that he was interfering and pleased they weren't looking at the entry wound on my bum.

"As the bullet went through it burnt your flesh," he said happily. "Friction, like, 'cos of the speed."

"That makes sense," said Ginny, ignoring me like a proper surgeon. "The pus must be the body's way of getting rid of the burnt bits. Do you think we should get it out?"

"Ain't doing any good inside," he said, "and it'll take forever to drain out natural."

"Right, then," she said. "Umm, Nat, this may hurt a little."

She pushed down with her thumbs roughly in the middle of the swelling then outwards towards the exit wound before I could protest.

It was agony and I tried to jerk my leg away but Wayne grabbed my ankle and held it down.

“Bite on this,” said Ginny, pushing a still wrapped roll of bandage into my mouth. She pushed on my leg again before I could spit it out and I nearly bit right through the crepe. As it was I bruised the sides of my hands thumping them on the ground.

She did it once more then wiped up the blood and pus and whatever else had come out then told me to turn over. I refused, between gasps, and Wayne just grabbed me by the shoulder and hip and flipped me. He held me down with a large hand in the centre of my back as the torture continued, this time clearing the entry wound.

“Thanks for that, Wayne,” said Ginny when she finally stopped and I lay, drained and helpless, on the ground. From my knee to my hip my leg felt twice the size and throbbed violently with every beat of my heart. “You can turn her the right way up again, now.”

As he flipped me over again I lashed out at him in anger but it was so weak that he barely noticed my hand hit his shoulder.

“You bastard!” I hissed.

He just laughed. “Look at that lot,” he said nodding at Ginny.

Ginny obligingly held up the cloths she'd used to clear up the mess and my stomach turned over.

“That was all inside my leg?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It should feel better soon. I think the swelling has gone down as well.”

I looked down at my leg but it was difficult to tell. The purple bruising was beginning to turn greenish-yellow and the colour patterns made the contours deceptively strange.

“Take these,” said Ginny, handing me a couple of pills and a bottle of soda water. “I'll clean it up and re-bandage it.”

“You think you got it all out?” I asked after I'd swallowed the pills.

“Doubt it,” she said. “We'll see how it looks tonight.”

“I'll look forward to it,” I said, wondering if they'd notice if I tried to make a break for it during the day.

They probably would, I decided, and even if they didn't they'd catch me fairly quickly as I could only hobble slowly. I felt a sudden surge of empathy with all the soldiers who'd been injured in battles during the middle ages. There was no M*A*S*H-like Flying Doctor service for the likes of me.

Wayne waited patiently while Ginny washed my leg and squirted antiseptic inside the wounds then bandaged me up again.

“I think I'll burn this lot,” she said, gathering up the cloths. “I don't think washing will be enough. Back in a few minutes.”

“Good girl, that,” said Wayne, approvingly, when she was out of earshot.

“I suppose so,” I said grudgingly although I knew he was right. “So how's the tank?”

“Buggered,” he said. “We left it charging all day yesterday and today there was nothing. Flat as a frigging pancake.”

“Oh,” I said and thought about it for a few moments. “So you've no idea what the problem is?”

“Itch is looking around,” he said, “but don't hold your breath.”

“Oh well,” I said, “it's not a major setback. It's not like we could move around freely with a bloody great tank. We'll just have to think of something else.”

“Sright,” he said. “Could've been fun, though.”

He sat there for a while just looking around then heaved himself off

the ground and wandered back to Itch and the tank. He only had the slightest of limps now and no longer had his wrist strapped.

* * *

“Oh, there you are,” said Alex some time later as though I had gone missing. He came into our little clearing from the forest side, not the lake.

“Hey,” I said, “where’ve you been?”

“Just went for a walk,” he said. “Not a lot to do here. I found the rest of the lake. It’s massive. There’s two or three people playing around on jet skis.”

“Will they come this way?” I asked, suddenly alarmed.

“Doubt it,” he said, sitting down beside me. “They’re way off up the far end. I couldn’t even hear them. They were just small blobs on the water but they behaved like jet skis. How’s your leg?”

We discussed our various injuries for a while then he told me he had an idea about the tank.

“It’s a bit academic now,” I said. “Its battery isn’t charging so that idea’s scuppered.”

“Oh, OK,” he said, disappointed. “Still, it was an interesting problem. Tanks are pretty out there and difficult to disguise. Easiest solution would be to put it inside a container and truck it around.”

“Where would we get a container and a truck?” I asked.

“Well, that’s another problem but I’m sure we could solve it if we really wanted to,” he said. “Do you want to hear my idea anyway?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Turn it into a carnival float,” he said. “Shouldn’t be too hard. Some cardboard and cloth and some creative use of paint should do the

trick.”

“Well, I guess,” I said, smiling. “What sort of float?”

“Oh anything really,” he said, “and being shaped like a tank there's room for people to stand on top and the sides, like a real float.”

“But wouldn't a float stand out just as much?” I asked, thinking about it. “After all, most floats are part of a parade or something so wouldn't people wonder why there's one driving around without a parade.”

“I thought of that too,” he said. “What's January 26th?”

“Oh, um, I know this,” I said, clicking my fingers, “isn't it Li Hong's birthday or something?”

“Oh, tush,” he said. “You could get arrested for that. It's China-Australia Day.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “I thought it rang a bell. Ohhh, gotcha!”

January 26th used to be Australia Day but was renamed China-Australia Day after the invasion. Of course, most Aboriginals called it Invasion Day because it celebrated the invasion of Australia by the whites. Ironically more than a few Australian whites now referred to it as Invasion Day as well, quietly. More to the point, when it was Australia Day there were a few celebrations and piss-ups around the country but it hadn't been that big a deal. Now it was China-Australia Day, Villages, at the urging of their Secretaries, organised festivities for the Village and more than a few banded together with neighbouring Villages to put on parades and have barbecues to celebrate the benevolence and goodwill of our new masters. Back in Juma Creek we just had a town barbecue on the beach and most of the locals got drunk. January 26th would quite likely be the one day of the year when our tank, disguised to look like some sort of float, could actually get away with it.

“That's actually a good idea,” I said, patting Alex on the knee, “although it's cutting things a bit fine, even if the tank was working. It's only a few weeks away.”

“Thirty five days, to be exact,” he said. “We could do a lot in thirty five days.”

“And there's Christmas and New Year,” I said. “They always disrupt things.”

“Actually they'd probably help,” said Alex, unwilling to give up his idea so readily. “Shops and businesses will be shut so it'll be easier to break in and steal things and there'll be all sorts of crap in the garbage afterwards that we could use to make the float. Decorations, coloured wrapping paper, tinsel.”

“True,” I said. “Maybe we'll find another tank for next year.”

* * *

Clark got up at his usual time and went through his usual routine of hating the world until he was properly awake, then he mellowed to simply disliking it. I think, in his secret heart, he would have liked reality to be more like one of those online virtual worlds where computer geeks strode round in tight leather trousers with very large swords and ravished willing maidens in between killing giant hairy trolls. No doubt one or two of said geeks liked being the maidens in such worlds but Clark didn't seem that type. Not that I actually knew what that type was.

“Hey,” he said suddenly after having sat barely a metre away for a good half an hour.

“Afternoon,” I said. I'd learnt not to say 'good' before 'morning' or 'afternoon' as he invariably replied “what's good about it?”. I'd also learnt not to be too cheerful although I wasn't feeling particularly cheerful. Clark didn't like cheerful people. They made him nervous.

“How's your leg?” he asked after several seconds where it had been obvious he'd been trying to think of something to say.

“Getting better,” I said, “although it'll be a while before I can walk properly on it.”

"I bet," he said. "Does it hurt to sit down?"

"Yes," I said.

"Oh," he said and the conversation lapsed for a while.

"I downloaded that satellite pic," he said. "Last night. Wanna see?"

"Sure," I said, "although it looks like the tank isn't going to work."

"Bummer," he said, scowling. "I was looking forward to that. Reckon we can think of something else though. Looks like a soft target. Have a look at this."

He shifted over and fiddled with his computer for a few moments then turned its screen to show me.

"See that?" he said pointing.

"No," I said, "all I can see is glare from the sky."

"Bummer," he said, twisting the screen this way and that. "Come on, let's go in my tent."

I sighed and reflected that it probably was a good idea to exercise my leg a little even though I really didn't want to. I levered myself up and hobbled over. Given that Wayne and Clark both shared the tent it didn't smell too bad inside although it was hotter inside than out.

I made myself comfortable on Wayne's sleeping bag and Clark put the computer between us.

"This is the general area," he said, pointing to the screen. "That's Station Road and there's the data centre."

For this height it was just a pale rectangle beside a dark line, surrounded by other rectangles.

"Are those other businesses?" I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, reducing the window and bringing up another full of text. “On one side is a company that makes steel frames for houses and on the other side is an electrical wholesaler. Behind is a crash repair place and scrap metal dealer and on the other side of the road is a cabinet maker and a plumbing equipment service and hire centre. The whole area is full of businesses and they’re surrounded by houses. It’s all built up although it’s fairly narrow.”

“What do you mean, narrow?” I asked.

“Umm,” he said, flipping through a variety of other images and maps, “oh, here. That’s western Sydney over here and there’s Penrith. It’s all built up all the way along the highway to Penrith but only, oh, twenty K or so wide. This estate is roughly in the middle so if we came in from the side we’d have at most 10K of built-up area to get through.”

“And where are we now?” I asked.

“Just down here,” he said, pointing to around the A and the S on the keyboard. “We’re, like, 40K away. If we cross the dam and come up this road we’ll come in here,” and he tapped the bottom of the screen below where the Industrial Estate was.

“Hey, I didn’t know we were so close,” I said in surprise. “I thought you said it was in central Sydney.”

“I don’t remember what I said,” he said, “but it doesn’t matter. The centre’s there and we’re here. Now, look at this,” and he flipped through some more images. “There, that’s the data centre.”

It was still a pale rectangle but it almost filled the width of the screen and a lot more details were apparent.

“I also found the plans for the building before it was turned into a data centre,” said Clark. “Do you want to see them?”

“Not right now,” I said. “Tell me the important bits.”

“OK,” he said. “The building itself is about 200m long and about 100m wide. It’s got four floors although the bottom floor is smaller.

Around it is ...”

“Why’s the bottom floor smaller?” I interrupted. “Wouldn’t it fall over?”

“Nah,” he said. “There’s this road around the building but around the back is a car park underneath which is about 10m wide and half the length of the building. It’s supported by concrete pillars.”

“Oh, OK,” I said, “carry on.”

“The other half, next to the car park, used to be loading bays for trucks,” he said, “but when the Chinese converted the building they bricked up the bays and turned the whole thing into a giant water tank.”

“What on earth for?” I asked.

“Three million litres of cooling water,” he said. “They needed that much for all the computer equipment inside.”

“Jesus,” I said, trying to imagine three million litres of water. “That’s a lot of computer equipment.”

“For sure,” said Clark. “I’ve been asking around and no one knows for certain but it looks like there’s something like a hundred thousand processors and a quarter of a million hard drives in the building. That’d generate a lot of heat.”

“I guess,” I said, unable to comprehend that many computers all in one place. “Doesn’t that mean there’ll be a lot of people in there, using the computers?”

“Shit no,” he said. “All those processors and drives will be mounted on racks. There’s probably only one monitor in the whole building, maybe not even that as they can be monitored remotely. It’s basically just one giant parallel processing computer. Break any part of it and the whole thing would stop working.”

“Like the water tank,” I said. “Puncture that and all the water would

flow out.”

“And everything inside would overheat,” he said. “Look at these,” and he tapped the top of the building.

“What are they?” I asked.

“Probably air conditioners and air filters,” he said, “and you see these?” He pointed out six large rectangles on the roof, one on each corner and two half way along the length. “Those look to be cooling fans, probably for the water. I don't see a pump though.”

“What about them?” I asked, pointing to two very large objects against the wall surrounding the building.

“Wouldn't put a pump there,” he said. “Too far away. Most likely the pump is inside the building next to the water tank. Those are probably the backup power.”

“Explain,” I said, fascinated by the satellite image.

“I'm just guessing,” he said, “but that amount of processing power probably needs three or four megawatts of electricity. There's almost certainly a giant power cable underground feeding off the nearest power station but we won't be able to see it in this image. Thing is, what if there's a glitch in the power supply or a power outage?”

“The computers would shut down?” I guessed.

“Spot on,” he said, “so they'll have a backup power generator, that's an absolute fundamental. By the size of it, I'd say it's that.”

The two large objects were in one of the back corners. One sat along the back wall and the other along the side wall.

“How big are they?” I asked.

“That one,” and he tapped the one along the back wall, “is the size of a shipping container, so it's probably the generator.”

“Wow” I said. “I thought generators were quite small.”

“Not for the megawatt range,” he said, smiling.

“Shame we can't use it to charge the tank,” I said flippantly. “We could probably do it in a minute or two. What's the other one? Another generator?”

“It's got rounded edges,” said Clark peering at the screen, “and what looks like valves at one end. I'd say that the generator is diesel powered and this is a tank of diesel. It's also directly in line with the main gates which would make it easier for a fuel tanker to deliver.”

“Seriously?” I asked. “Isn't that dangerous? Surely they wouldn't risk a fire?”

“No, not that risky,” he said. “Diesel isn't inflammable like petrol. It will burn but it takes a lot of effort, not like petrol which more or less explodes. I saw a video about it once.”

“OK,” I said. “I take your word for it. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but there seem to be a lot of vulnerabilities here.”

“Absolument,” he said in an abysmal French accent. “Crack the cooling water tank or the pump and the place will overheat quickly. Ditto the air conditioners and fans on the roof. Also, although you can't see it in this image as it's an overhead, there are a lot of windows from when it was offices. Smash the windows and let in the hot polluted dusty air and it'll bugger up the hard drives. Maybe we can get something explosive or inflammable through the windows as well. Also there'll be some pretty big data cables although one or two of the things on the roof might be wireless dishes.”

“Or possibly set fire to the tank of diesel or damage the generator?” I said.

“Nah, not really,” he said. “They're just for backup although if we could get the diesel inside the building or the cooling water that would work.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a little deflated. “Maybe we could find the power lines and cut those?”

He sucked his teeth in horror at that idea.

“You ever got an electric shock from the mains?” he asked, “now imagine that from a megawatt power line. I wouldn't go near it, the electromagnetic field alone will be pretty insane. It'll be shielded but you'd have to get through the shielding to get at the cabling and it would probably melt your fillings.”

“OK, maybe not,” I said, “but there's still plenty of other things we can work on. What about security?”

“See these?” he asked, tapping what looked to be walls around the road around the building. “They're walls. I reckon they're about seven or eight metres high.”

“How on earth can you tell?” I asked. “This looks to have been taken from directly overhead.”

“The shadows,” he said. “It was taken around 4 in the afternoon so I estimated where the sun would be and worked out the height of the wall from the length of the shadows.”

“Impressive,” I said. “You've done well.”

“Yeah,” he said dismissively. “Now, these are the gates. They're probably the same height as the wall and there's no other way in, unless you climb over. These things here are guards, one each side of the gates. There are also a few others dotted around, no doubt some Chinese general figured out the best strategic places. There are also four on the roof. No sign of any dogs, though.”

“No vehicles?” I asked.

“Bound to be,” he said, “but they're probably in the car park, out of sight. The guards probably have a room or two in the buildings. There's bound to be toilets in there, maybe even showers.”

“How long's the place been operational?” I asked.

“They started work on it back in 2026,” said Clark. “Took nearly three years to convert so probably around three years. Why?”

“And there's never been an attack?” I asked. “Direct attack, I mean, not a hacking attack.”

“Not that I know of,” he said. “You're getting at something, aren't you.”

“Not really,” I said, “I was just thinking that if nothing ever happens then those guards must be getting pretty bored. Is the place guarded at night?”

“Bound to be,” he said. “Computers never sleep.”

“You know,” I said, studying the satellite image. “I think we might be able to do something here, tank or no tank. It's got a lot of weaknesses and it's guarded by bored guards, and probably not elite guards at that. It's just another anonymous building on an industrial estate. Most people wouldn't have a clue what it is.”

“Thought you'd like it,” he said complacently.

“I do,” I replied. “I'm sure if we all put out minds to it we can think up something. Could you explain all this to the others? Maybe after dinner?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Let's go outside again,” I said. “It's hot in here and people will be wondering what you and I are up to.”

“How do you mean?” he asked, puzzled.

“Forget it,” I said, realising that it would never occur to any of the others that I would be getting up to anything like that with Clark.

I managed to wriggle out of the tent without hurting my leg too much

and stood up. I suddenly sensed something in the air and looked around uncertainly.

“Where is everyone?” I asked as Clark emerged to join me.

“No idea,” he said squinting.

I hobbled forward a couple of paces then jerked to a stop as a couple of clanks came from the bushes and several voices cheered.

“Jesus!” I exclaimed. “Was that the tank?”

Chapter Twenty Six

It turned out, or so Itch thought anyway, that someone had replaced a component in the tank in the not too distant past. Most likely just before the tank went off on its last mission. When whoever it was put the thick armoured cover back a couple of wires had been trapped and, with the vibrations of the tank as it travelled, those wires had been slowly chewed through. They were heavy duty wires, as befitted a battery of that size, but no match for the iron plates. Itch suspected that the wires had intermittently shorted out, draining the battery a little each time until one wire finally broke and the tank came to a halt, the battery dead as a dodo. As our solar panels fed power into the battery it had immediately gone straight out again, through the tank's body and back to the ground.

Ever resourceful, and using the small toolkit she'd found in a storage compartment, Itch had separated the wires, repaired the broken one and insulated them. Three hours or so of charging had been enough to let the tank drive forward about two centimetres. Not enough to go anywhere but enough, as Itch put it, to 'prove the concept', or at least partially. She wanted to leave the tank alone for a few days so that it had enough power to test its various systems, although we were all quietly confident that everything would work.

Still, the important thing was that the tank was electrified again and the effect it had on us was even more electrifying. Suddenly we were full of enthusiasm and purpose and, without any discussion, voting or even second thoughts, we found the decision was made. We had a tank, we were invincible and we were going to take out the Data Centre! We were fairly bouncing with enthusiasm and Marcie and Wayne took the van into Penrith to find a phone or two and buy some more portable solar panels. Itch did the maths in her head and estimated that with five more panels and no bad weather the battery would be 80% charged by the 22nd of January, four days before our proposed DC Day, as in Data Centre.

They say a watched kettle never boils but watching a megawatt battery charge from nine portable solar panels brings a whole new meaning to the word patience. It went up roughly 2½% a day.

Christmas Day came and went and we barely noticed it as we were busy working on our float conversion. The biggest problem was the barrel of the tank as it extended a couple of metres beyond the front and made it pretty obvious that this was not a flatbed truck or something like that. We spent several hours brainstorming and eventually came up with the idea of disguising the tank as a Chinese Dragon. A simple wooden frame covered in painted cloth would serve for the neck of the dragon and support a head made from chicken wire. Another frame would supply the tail and we could make some wings to go on the sides from cardboard. Implementing it was a little more difficult but we were able to get wire and wood on Christmas Eve and plenty of cardboard in the days after Christmas. It was actually quite fun and, even though I was still limited to hobbling, I was able to sit on the ground and splash gold and red paint over cloth.

"I thought, since it's New Year's Day," said Itch, as though what she was saying was of little or no interest, "that it would be an auspicious day to test the tank."

We'd been working on our various tasks for making the tank look like a dragon and had stopped for refreshments. There was a momentary silence as everyone stopped chomping and slurping to digest this remark then there were a couple of cheers and comments along the lines of 'about time'.

"If that's all right with you," continued Itch, looking at me.

"It's fine by me," I said, "so long as you think there's enough charge in the battery."

"It's a little over 30%," she said. "That should be more than enough for testing. Who will be driving it?"

Now that was a question I'd been pondering off and on for a while. I daresay I should take that responsibility myself but I seriously doubted my leg would be up to it. Whoever was in the tank would be at risk since, if anything went wrong, it would be the obvious target. It wasn't even as though we'd be able to tow the tank out of trouble. Great though the van was it wasn't designed for towing tanks. Moreover,

since the tank had two seats it presumably required two people to operate it, which meant putting two people at risk.

"I don't know yet," I said, not looking at Marcie who, I knew, would kill to get to drive a tank. "Does it matter?"

"No," said Itch. "I just thought it would be good practice for whoever will be driving. It will be good to have some assistance, however, as we will need to work out how to operate it. There is no instruction manual in any of the storage compartments."

"I'll help you," I said. "I ought to have an idea how to operate it regardless."

There were several sighs of disappointment but no one actually went as far as to complain. The only one who couldn't possibly be involved was Wayne since he was too big to get through the hatch.

I hobbled through the bushes with Itch then stopped, my heart in my mouth.

"Who did that?" I said, pointing to the words 'Nat's Crew' painted in large black letters on the side.

"Clark," said Itch. "It's part of his plan to make sure the Chinese know who attacked the Data Centre. It's on both sides and on top of the turret."

I knew that that was the intention but I hadn't expected my name to be displayed at all, let alone in such big letters. Being that conspicuous made me a little nervous.

"Oh well," I said, swallowing the big lump in my throat, "what's the rest of his plan?"

"He's going to get hold of a drone with a camera and live stream the attack," she said. "He and his online friends are working out a way to get it broadcast as widely as possible." She unplugged the cable connecting the solar panels and dropped it on the ground.

“Great,” I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. I could see the sense in that but did he really have to use my name?

“Come on up,” said Itch, climbing onto the front panel of the tank using the big rubber coated wheels that held the wide caterpillar track in place. “Take my hand.”

I still couldn't bend my leg much but with Itch's help I managed to get up. The tank looked big enough from the ground but when standing on it the ground looked a long way away. I clung on to the barrel while Itch slipped through the hatch then cautiously let myself down. The metal was at least 50 millimetres thick and cold, even in the sun. I'd peered inside, as we all had, but this was the first time I'd actually got inside. It was dim, very cramped and very very uncomfortable. The two seats were so close together that Itch's and my shoulders touched each other and the sides of the interior and there wasn't room to straighten our legs. I had to sit slightly sideways to get my bandaged leg in.

“Hey,” I said suddenly. “How do you see out?”

“That is something I am hoping to find out,” said Itch, flicking a switch. Two small interior lights came one, one each side. “There are no windows.”

“And no steering wheel or bar,” I said. “Just these screens.”

There were two, one in front of each of us. They were mounted on the front wall of the tank and were maybe half as big again as a tablet computer. In between them was a panel with four switches, one of which was in the up position so that presumably operated the interior lights. There was also a dial that pointed to 31 with a small green light inside. I guessed this showed the level of charge in the battery and the light meant it was charging. Next to where I was sitting were two levers mounted on the floor and just beside my right foot was a pedal. Between the seats was another lever. On some sort of hook beside Itch was a set of headphones, a microphone and a large red button. Above the screen in front of me was a slightly creased photograph of a smiling Chinese girl in a business suit. She didn't look the pin-up type so I figured she was the wife or girlfriend of the driver. I felt a

momentary pang of sympathy for her since there was a good chance the dead Chinese we'd found nearby was her boyfriend or husband but then repressed it. He shouldn't have been here in the first place. This wasn't his country, it was mine. Still, she kept looking at me so I pulled it off and pushed it under the seat.

"So have you any idea how to operate it?" I asked. "Jesus, this seat is uncomfortable."

"You're sitting on the harness," said Itch. "It fits like this," and she gestured with her hand. Only then did I notice she had a strap over each shoulder and another around her waist.

"Ohh," I said and squirmed around while I retrieved my straps. "Do I need to wear it?"

"I have no idea what is going to happen," she said. "The tank may even be booby trapped."

"Are you serious?" I demanded, staring at her, one strap still trapped behind my shoulder.

"It is a possibility," she said calmly, "but I expect not. I doubt the Chinese were expecting the tank to lose power and very likely the complete loss of power will have reset its systems anyway. And, no, I do not know how to operate it. This is one of the purposes of this test. What I do know is that this switch powers up the computer and those levers beside you appear to operate the tracks. At least, when I accidentally moved one the tank lurched forward. I have not experimented as yet."

"But you did power up the computer?" I asked, fumbling for the remaining strap. "And it didn't blow up or do anything nasty?"

"Yes," she said, "and no," and flicked the main power switch.

I froze momentarily but nothing happened other than the screen in front of me lit up and displayed a forest scene. I stared at it in confusion for a moment then glanced at Itch's. Hers was displaying a list of Chinese characters.

“Ahh,” she said, looking at it and nodding. “This would seem to be the seat for the person who fires the gun. This is a menu of options.”

“You speak Chinese?” I asked. I was surprised she'd never mentioned it.

“No, I do not,” she said. “Presumably this is touchscreen? I see no keyboard or pointing device.”

“But you can read what it says?” I asked. “Isn't it in Chinese? It is a Chinese tank, after all.”

“China and Japan have the same written language,” she said, touching one of the listed items. Another menu appeared.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “I thought Japanese and Chinese were different languages.”

“They are,” she said, “but to our discredit we Japanese never developed writing. Our written language is almost entirely Chinese. It came to us in the 4th century when Buddhism came to Japan from China and the early Buddhists had to learn to read the texts.”

“But surely that means you have the same language?” I said, bored with my forest scene.

“Not at all,” said Itch, turning to look at me. “Our written language is ideographic so the symbols represent concepts whereas your alphabet is phonetic. We adopted the written characters of Chinese because we share the same concepts but the pronunciation is very much our own. It is like,” and she paused to think of an example, “oh, if I showed you a picture of a block of apartments. You would call it a block of apartments but an American would call it a condominium. Both are the same concept but you have different spoken words for it.”

“But doesn't that get confusing?” I asked. “How do you know how to say what the picture is?”

“Not at all,” she said. “I am Japanese so I use the Japanese spoken words. I do not know the Chinese spoken words. Perhaps if I was

fluent in both I might get confused but perhaps not. I am sure if you spoke French or German you would find words spelt the same way as an Australian word but not be confused by them. Certainly your language is very confusing for a foreigner, such as myself, to learn. Bear and bare, for example.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Bear means to carry but also it is an animal,” she said, “and bare means uncovered. One sound, two spellings and three meanings. It is very difficult to learn Australian. How do you not get confused?”

“We often do,” I said. “It's surprisingly easy to misunderstand what someone else is saying or writing but generally we go by the context. If we were attacked by a bear it would be the animal unless there was another word to say what it was that had no clothes on but it can be difficult. Like saying it would be hard to bear being a bare bear.”

She looked at me strangely then shook her head.

“That is not all,” she said. “Take L E A D. It is a word with one spelling but has two ways of saying it and three meanings.”

“Lead?” I said, puzzled. “What's the third meaning?”

“It is a metal,” she said, “and it means to show someone the way and it is a power cable.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, “I'd forgotten that one. And it's another word for a dog's leash.”

“It is very confusing,” she said, “but what is important is that I can read this. This should ...” and she touched one of the options.

Her screen changed to a forest scene just like mine except there was a red circle in the centre.

“That is where the gun is pointing,” she said. “So if I do ...” and she put her finger on the red circle and dragged it to the left.

Immediately there was a rumble overhead and I ducked instinctively. Itch looked up then undid the clasp of her harness and half stood up so she could see out of the hatch.

“Excellent,” she said, sitting back down again. “The barrel has moved to the left as well. It would seem that the red circle marks the target.”

“So the forest is what’s in front of us?” I asked.

“I imagine so,” she said. “I wonder if I can zoom?”

She put her thumb and finger on the screen and swiped them together. Immediately the forest scene receded and Wayne and Marcie became visible on one side.

“Aha,” said Itch and moved the red circle to point at Wayne.

There was more rumbling overhead then Wayne jumped to one side as, presumably, the barrel of the tank pointed right at him. Marcie laughed and stepped out of the way as well.

“Excellent,” said Itch and flicked her thumb and forefinger apart and moved the circle again. The screen zoomed in on Wayne’s torso.

“Just make sure you don’t fire,” I said anxiously.

“There is no option to fire,” said Itch. “Presumably that is what this red button is for.”

“We’ll try that later,” I said, “but get the gun away from Wayne.”

She re-aligned the gun on an unsuspecting tree then spent a while trying to figure out how to get back to the menu options. It turned out that triple tapping the screen did that.

“This is the weapons menu,” she said. “There is an option here for explosive disks.”

“Explosive disks?” I asked. “What are they?”

"I suspect they are the disks we found," said Itch. "I'll show you later."

"Tell me now," I said. "If there are explosives in here I want to know about them before I set them off accidentally."

"They aren't in here," she said. "They're behind us. We found three jukeboxes of disks which Wayne thinks are the shells. It would be best to talk to him as he knows more about weapons than I do. What is this, I wonder?"

She touched another menu option and a map appeared on the screen. She stared at it for a few moments then zoomed out.

"Oh!" she exclaimed and suddenly leaned forward and flicked the power switch off. Both screens died.

"What's happened?" I demanded, my anxiety levels increasing rapidly. First explosives then she shut down the computer.

"The map was showing our location," she said. "I should have thought of that. Most likely the tank has been broadcasting its position since we powered up the system."

"You mean the Chinese know where we are?" I asked, my anxiety level rising even higher.

"It is possible," she said, "although it is also possible that they were not expecting a signal from this tank and so have not tracked us."

"But we need to get out of here," I said, undoing my harness. "This whole thing is a waste of time if the Chinese can track us!"

"There is a simple solution," she said. "One moment."

She climbed out through the hatch and called to Wayne to take off the tank's aerial.

"That should be sufficient until I can locate the transmitter receiver," she said. "Although it will mean we have no map inside the tank."

“But we still need to move somewhere else,” I said. “They may have picked up that signal and are sending someone to investigate. How do I drive this thing?”

“That we still have to work out,” said Itch, “and we will have to wait until Wayne removes the aerial. I strongly suspect your screen shows what is in front of us and you use that instead of a window. There must be at least two cameras mounted somewhere.”

“Why two?” I asked.

“One for driving and one for shooting,” she said. “We may be driving in a different direction to the target.”

“And these levers are used for driving?” I asked.

“I suspect so,” said Itch. “How, we have yet to find out.”

I looked more closely at the two levers to my right. They both stuck up vertically and were inside slots that extended forwards and backwards. Gingerly I pushed one forward and nothing happened, other than it stayed where I'd left it when I let go.

“There is no power,” said Itch, as metallic clinking came from outside. “I would guess that one lever is for one track and the other is for the other track.”

“And it would be sensible to push them forward to go forward,” I said, “and backward to go backwards. So, I guess to turn right I would move the left lever further forward than the right lever.”

“That would make sense,” said Itch. “And if that is the case then moving one forward and the other backward would allow the tank to pivot on the spot.”

“That would be pretty cool,” I said. “It'll take some getting used to but a turning circle of zero, that's neat! So how do I stop this thing?”

“Perhaps re-centring the drive levers would do that,” said Itch, leaning over to look. “Cutting the power to the wheels would stop them

moving.”

“Actually no,” I said. “It’ll stop them being driven but they will almost certainly free-wheel and I’m guessing this tank weighs several tons. It’ll need a powerful brake to bring it to a stop which must be what this pedal is for and if that’s a foot brake then this,” and I put my hand on the lever between the seats, “must be the handbrake so it doesn’t roll downhill when parked.”

“Makes sense,” said Itch. “We’ll try it when Wayne’s taken the aerial off.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to be up to driving this. My leg’s killing me already and there’s no way I’m going to be able to drive it all the way to the Data Centre.”

“So who will drive?” asked Itch. “I imagine I will have to be the gunner as no one else can read the menu options.”

“Aerial’s off!” shouted Wayne from outside.

“True,” I said, “and Ginny isn’t confident enough with the van so this would be too much of a challenge. Clark will need to operate his drone and Wayne can’t get inside. That leaves Marcie and Alex. I’ll get out now and send one of them inside. Figure out how to drive it then we’ll move somewhere else in case the Chinese did pick us up.”

“OK,” said Itch. She powered up the computer again and selected the menu options to get the map. This time the screen stayed blank with a few Chinese characters on it. “It says it is unable to locate our position.”

“Awesome,” I said.

With great difficulty I managed to stand on the seat then lever myself out of the tank. It was made more difficult by the barrel which had been moved by Itch and was now partially over the hatch. I slid down the sloping front panel as it seemed easier than trying to climb down. Landing on the ground sent waves of pain through my thigh and bum. The others had joined Wayne and Marcie and were grouped around

the tank expectantly.

“Marcie,” I said, tight lipped and holding my leg. “Do you fancy learning to drive this thing?”

“Shit, yeah!” she said, her eyes lighting up.

“OK, then,” I said. “Hop in and work out how. Itch’ll help.”

“Sweet as,” she said and give me a quick hug.

“Alex, could you learn to drive it as well?” I asked. “Be great if we have two who can.”

“Sure,” he said, “now?”

“There isn’t room inside,” I said, “but later, OK. Hey everyone, there’s a chance the tank gave away our position. That’s why we got Wayne to remove the aerial, but we have to pack up everything and move somewhere else. OK, folks, let’s do it.”

The others looked panicked for a moment then rushed to start packing things up and putting them in the van.

“Wayne,” I called before he disappeared. “Explain to me about the jukeboxes.”

“Sure,” he said coming back. “They’re just behind the turret.”

“What are jukeboxes?” I said. “I’ve heard of them but I don’t know what they are.”

“Oh, that’s just my name for them,” he said. “I don’t know what they’re really called.”

“But what is a jukebox?” I persisted.

“Don’t you know what a jukebox is?” he asked.

“If I did I wouldn’t be asking,” I said, trying to be patient.

"Guess you're too young at that," he said. "You remember CDs?"

"Vaguely," I said.

"Well, before them was records," he said. "Jukeboxes were machines you put money in and they played records for you."

"Why couldn't you play them without money?" I asked. "You could with CDs."

"This was in pubs and cafes," he said. "Anyway, this here tank is electric like our guns. It fires big iron disks."

"Jesus," I said, looking at the barrel of the tank. "How big are they?"

"About 25cm across and a centimetre thick," he said. "Bloody heavy bastards too. Gotta be four or five kilos easy."

"That must do a lot of damage," I said. "Itch said something about them being explosive?"

"Some are, I think," he said as the tank suddenly lurched forwards and turned to one side. Fortunately it turned away from us but we leapt backwards anyway.

"Shit," said Wayne. "I hope that girl knows what she's doing."

"Why do you think they're explosive?" I asked, hoping Marcie did as well.

"There's three big containers of 'em," he said. "Two have just bare iron disks in, 'bout a hundred in each container. The other container's got thicker ones, only about eighty of 'em in the same size container and there's a red stripe down the side of the box. I reckon they's iron disks with some explosive inside. Anyway, the containers is what I call jukeboxes, 'cos they're like a stack of records."

Chapter Twenty Seven

The plan was to get to the Data Centre around dawn but we got that wrong. It turned out that although the tank had a top speed of about 60 kilometres an hour we couldn't go that fast. The dragon superstructure was too fragile. After reattaching a wing and doing some makeshift repairs to the head before reattaching that as well we kept the speed down to a more sedate 30kph. The dragon shuddered and rippled and threatened to fall apart even at that speed but held together. Fortunately, being a public holiday, there was virtually no traffic although we did come across another float which was just as amateurishly put together as ours. It seemed likely that the people who'd made it had done it because it was required of them rather than from any noble sense of purpose.

So, instead of getting to the Data Centre at dawn we arrived around 7am. It was promising to be a gloriously sunny day, not that rain would have made any difference. There were no clouds in the sky and the humidity was quite low. I had been worried that there would be people turning up for work at the neighbouring businesses but the industrial estate looked to be pretty much shut down, no doubt on the orders of the Secretary of the local Commercial Association. Perhaps the businesses were having their own China-Australia Day parade although if they were it wasn't nearby.

We parked our little convoy around the corner from the Data Centre, in McEvoy Road, so we could get ourselves organised and strip the dragon off the tank. Marcie was driving it with Itch riding shotgun and Wayne and Alex were on the bikes. Ginny was driving the van and Clark had the drone and filming to do. I, alone, had nothing to do so I fretted and worried and worked myself into a very negative state of mind. In between envisioning every possible thing that could go wrong and stressing about why we hadn't thought up contingency plans for most of them I also fretted about the consequences. Although this had seemed a great idea when we thought of it and while we were making our preparations now that the moment had arrived I was having major second thoughts. What if one or more of us died or got badly injured? Marcie and Itch, in particular, had no training for operating a tank so what if one of them did something wrong and blew it up rather than the Data Centre? What if there were

more guards than we were expecting and Wayne and Alex, whose jobs were to stay at the gate after the tank had burst through and stop any guards getting out onto the street, got shot themselves? And what, exactly, would the guards do while Itch was destroying the building? It didn't seem likely that they'd just stand around and quietly watch. Maybe they had anti-tank weapons.

It also irritated me that Ginny sat in the van's driving seat humming quietly to herself and looking perfectly calm and Clark fiddled with the TV he'd installed inside the van and linked to an internet connection so we could watch what the drone was streaming. Neither of them seemed in the least bit nervous.

"OK," said Clark suddenly. "Good to go."

He slammed open the side door and jumped out.

"What's happening?" I asked, twisting awkwardly around in the front seat to look in the back.

My leg still hurt. It wasn't healing as well as it could be and was still a little pussy although it was steadily getting better. Ginny had wanted me to go to a doctor and get some antibiotics but I'd refused. Maybe once this mission was over and we'd all been arrested again the Chinese would give me some. Somehow I doubted it.

"We're getting an image," he said lifting the drone out and putting it on the ground.

It wasn't one of the big fancy military drones. It was a small plastic thing barely 50cm across that looked like an X with four little rotors, one at the end of each arm. Importantly it had a camera in the centre of the X which looked straight down most of the time but could be swivelled.

I immediately looked at the TV but all I could see was an out of focus greyness.

"So what am I seeing?" I asked.

“The pavement,” he said, picking up his remote control console.

He clicked a switch and twiddled with something and all four rotors buzzed and the drone shot up into the air. All of a sudden I could see an aerial view of the van and the tank.

“Cool,” I said as the image expanded as the drone dropped back down again. “So is this live on the net?”

“No, not yet,” said Clark. “Wave at the camera.”

The drone was hovering outside the side door, looking inside and I could see myself and part of Ginny on the screen so I waved. My image waved back at me. My hair needed brushing.

“This won't go live until we actually start,” said Clark. “Then it'll be recorded on servers in Canada, Belgium and South Africa. When it's over some friends of mine will distribute lots of copies all over the place and post it on social media all over the world.”

“I thought we were live streaming inside Australia,” I said as the screen went blank. Clark had turned off the drone to save its batteries.

“We will be,” he said. “As a minimum, everyone who accesses the surveillance system will see it live but I've got a couple of friends working on putting it through every internet hub in the country so anyone who accesses the net from inside Australia should get it. I'm just waiting for the OK to say they're ready.”

“Great,” I said. “So should we wait or start stripping the tank?”

“Oh, start stripping it,” he said. “They shouldn't be long. They've already figured out how, it's just that the top level admin password is changed twice a day and it's due to be changed any minute now.”

“You mean you'll be getting the new password as soon as it's changed?” I said in disbelief.

Clark gave a twitch of a smile. “Yeah,” he said slowly. “Umm, we've got some software on a certain computer somewhere that's used by

someone who should know better. Best you don't know too much about it."

As if on cue his phone pinged to say he had an email.

"Sweet as," he said, checking it. "We're good to go."

It took barely five minutes to strip off the dragon disguise and our tank stood there in all its glory, incongruous in a suburban Sydney industrial estate. Doubly incongruous with its livid "Nat's Crew" markings.

"OK," I said, feeling I had to make some sort of pre-mission pep talk but not knowing what to say. "Marcie, Itch, you're going to be awesome but remember, if there's any sign of trouble you can't handle get yourselves out of there and back to the bikes. Wayne, Alex, give them covering fire and try to take out as many of the Chinese as you can but get the girls out whatever happens. Don't let any of the soldiers take the fight out onto the street. We don't want any Aussie civilians hurt or killed."

"Yeah, yeah," said Wayne, "we've been through all this. Stop wasting time."

I had to laugh.

"OK," I said. "Let's do it. Oh, Itch, don't forget. Don't touch the diesel tank. We don't want it rupturing and polluting the environment."

"I won't forget," said Itch, breathless as always. "Come on Marcie."

She jumped onto the rubber coated metal slabs of the tank's track and started to climb inside.

"Hey," I said and she paused, looking back expectantly. "Good luck, all of you and remember, we may be doing this for Australia but I am so proud of you all. This is going to be awesome!"

"Right!" said Wayne forcefully and punched the air with his fist.

“Right!” we all echoed and punched the air ourselves.

It was quite an emotional few moments then Itch disappeared inside the tank and Marcie followed. Wayne and Alex climbed on their bikes and followed as Marcie lurched away, their electric engines whining.

“We’re now live,” said Clark as I climbed back in the van.

“What the hell?” I exclaimed as Ginny started the engine, ready for a quick getaway if needed. She twisted to look at the TV screen as well and laughed. “What’s all that on the screen? Is that what’s being streamed?”

Superimposed over an aerial image of a tank and two motorcycles moving slowly along a road were the words:

HAPPY AUSTRALIA DAY!
Hey China ~ Nat's Crew Says Screw You!

and at the bottom, in smaller lettering:

live from main surveillance data centre, sydney
www.natscrew.political

Several pictures of kangaroos hopped around the edges of the screen as well.

“Yeah,” said Clark, looking up from his drone console. “Cute, isn’t it.”

“Jesus,” I said, my throat constricted a little by the thought that my name was being broadcast live across the Internet. “There’s no doubt who we are then.”

“That’s the whole point,” he said grinning happily.

“Just one little thing,” I said. “You misspelled Sydney.”

“You what?” he exclaimed then groaned. “Shit, sorry. Too late to change it now, they’re almost at the gates.”

“And what's with this website?” I asked.

“Tell you later,” he said. “The guards have spotted us.”

The drone dropped down and we could clearly see two guards peering through the bars of the gates trying to see what was coming down the road. They didn't appear too alarmed as their guns were still over their shoulders. Then the tank started to veer onto the other side of the road and we could see the guards jabbering to each other although there was no sound with the video. Then Marcie made a sudden turn to the left and came to a halt directly opposite the gates, the barrel of the tank pointing directly at the guards.

Their alarm was immediate and one started talking to his hand, which probably held a radio, and the other unslung his gun. They both backstepped several paces. Unseen by the guards, Wayne and Alex got off their bikes and took up station against the wall beside the gates.

The tableau stayed frozen for all of two seconds, seemingly an eternity, then the tank shot forward as Marcie must have fed full power to the engine. As the tank smashed into the gates and lurched slightly as the gates' metal rods bent and twisted underneath it, the guards leapt out of the way and another figure appeared from behind the Data Centre building. The lack of sound made the whole scene very surreal.

The figure stopped and gawped as the tank slammed to a halt, skidding slightly on the remains of one of the gates, then ran back behind the building. The turret of the tank rotated a little to the right then there was a sudden explosion of concrete as a rent appeared in the corner of the building. Itch had unleashed one of the projectiles and its effect was devastating. Ginny and I both cheered and Clark swooped the drone in for a closer look at the damage. There was definitely a hole in the wall and it was likely that the 4kg iron projectile had done more damage inside as it ricocheted around.

As the turret rotated slightly further to the right one of the guards, in a display of foolish bravado, jumped onto the back of the tank. There was nothing he'd be able to do against the 50mm armour plating but perhaps he felt a sense of duty. It was wasted as Alex pointed his gun

and the guard fell off. Moments later there was another explosion from the wall further along as Itch unleashed a second projectile. The second guard just stood there, watching impotently, then suddenly realised that there was a target he could fire at and tried to shoot Alex but Wayne got him first. More cheering from inside the van.

Itch fired five or six shots along the length of the building then Marcie powered the tank forward so they could start to do damage to the rear of the building. A number of guards had appeared and were firing at the tank but to no effect. Marcie deliberately aimed the tank at the corner support pillar over the car park which was under the rear section of the building then came to a stop so suddenly that the tank skidded a little and spun round to the right.

“Something's happened,” I exclaimed, leaning forward to stare hard at the TV. “Why did she do that?”

A moment later the tank lurched backwards and crashed into the wall adjoining the neighbouring business, knocking part of it down. Then it slammed forward again, this time to the left, to clear the wall. The turret turned to the right and fired directly down the length of the car park as Marcie reversed back out towards the remains of the gates at high speed.

“What was that?” said Ginny suddenly, cocking her head. “I heard something.”

“What?” I asked, unable to tear my eyes away from the screen.

Marcie was now level with the front of the building and was turning hard so the tank was going backwards over the rubble of the damage done in the first barrage.

“I thought I heard a sudden roaring,” said Ginny, listening intently. “From over there somewhere.”

“Oh shit!” I exclaimed, putting both my hands on my head in horror.

Another tank had appeared, from the car park under the building. It was considerably bigger than ours and I could see its twin exhaust

boxes spewing diesel fumes as it hurried around the side of the building.

Marcie was now moving forward again, trying to go head first out through the gates but the other tank had it in its sights even though it wasn't yet level with the front of the building. There was a jet of flame from its barrel and the driveway immediately in front of our tank disappeared, along with a large section of the front wall. Our tank was now flying backwards again trying to get out of the way and Itch managed to let off a projectile at the Chinese tank which glanced off its front section and ripped into the side wall. Wayne ran across the street and stared back in horror. There was nothing whatsoever he could do to help.

Itch managed to let off two more projectiles into the side of the building, this time raking the second floor, as Marcie took our tank at high speed to the far end. She was just starting to curve around the side of the building when the Chinese tank got far enough past the corner of the building to swivel its barrel around and unleashed a second shell at our tank. The shell caught the front edge of its track and the tank was spun sideways and crashed into the side wall. The girls must have been badly shaken but Marcie kept her head and immediately started to reverse again, intending to put the building between them and the Chinese tank.

"Oh, god, they're damaged," I exclaimed, pointing at the TV. "Look!"

"They're still moving," said Ginny, her face set and worried.

"But a lot more slowly," I said. "Can you get in closer, Clark?"

Obligingly he swooped the drone down and across the path of our tank and we could see that one of the wheels inside that track was bent and twisted and a section of the track itself was missing. Our tank was moving but it was limping. Clark brought the drone up and we could see that Marcie was heading for the back of the building. So was the other tank.

"There's another drone here," said Clark.

“What? Where?” I shrieked.

He fiddled with his controls and managed to get a glimpse of another drone, similar to ours.

“It's not a military one,” he said thoughtfully, oblivious to the tank battle going on below. “I think someone nearby has come to watch the fun as well.”

“The fun?” I exclaimed loudly. “Marcie and Itch are going to get killed!”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “There's that too. I'm sure they'll think of something.”

His phone pinged to say he had an email and he quickly read it. Then the image on the screen disappeared and was replaced with a mass of fast moving numbers.

“OK,” he said studying the screen. “Looks like the counter attack has started. There seems to be a DDOS attack on at least one of our servers.”

“Sod that!” I screamed, hitting him hard on his arm. “Get the girls back!”

“OK,” he said and the screen of the battle reappeared.

We were just in time to see Itch fire at the Chinese tank down behind the building. Again the iron disk skittered off the side of the tank but this time it ricocheted off and slammed into the diesel storage tank that supplied the Data Centre's backup power generator. We could see the diesel fuel spilling out everywhere. Then the Chinese tank fired back. A gout of flame spewed out of its barrel and the shell caught our tank dead centre, lifting it up and throwing it against the wall. It balanced for a couple of seconds on the rear tips of its tracks then toppled forwards, smashing onto the ground. Even without zooming in we could see that our tank was never going to move again. The tracks on both sides were peeled off and the front wheels a mangled mess.

"They're gonna die, they're gonna die," I moaned, staring at the screen in horror.

"Look," shouted Ginny. "Someone's getting out."

Sure enough, the hatch had opened and someone, Marcie by the look of it, was worming her way out. For a brief moment she looked up and her face was clearly visible on the drone's camera. Then she leapt off the tank and sprinted away down the side of the building. At the far end several of the guards ran off towards the main gate to intercept her. We could see their feet splashing in the spilt diesel. Alex and Wayne, not having any idea of what was going on on the other side of the building, nevertheless started a gun battle with the guards, taking them by surprise.

"Come on Itch, get out of there," I muttered, willing her to get out. "Come on!"

She didn't. She stayed inside.

The tank had come to rest at an angle to the Chinese tank and the Chinese fired another shell at it. Again it hit and slammed our tank against the wall. Incredibly the turret of our tank came around, slowly and jerkily, until it was pointing at the Chinese tank. Then it fired. Itch must have swapped to the explosive projectiles as this one hit the Chinese tank and exploded, causing it to jerk backwards. It didn't seem to be significantly damaged but it had lost its aim and had to manoeuvre slightly to regain it. Just as it was about to fire again Itch unleashed another explosive projectile and again caught the tank. She managed to fire two more before the Chinese tank was able to fire back but this time our tank was a sitting target. It was unable to manoeuvre and had no driver anyway. The shell slammed into our tank, throwing it against the remains of the wall. Again it toppled forwards and, as it hit the ground, Itch fired off one last projectile. She hadn't been able to aim and it went wide of the Chinese tank and smashed into the remains of the diesel storage tank.

Diesel doesn't explode the way petrol does but it does burn if it's heated enough to turn into gas. The heat from that last explosive projectile must have been sufficient as the storage tank burst into

flames then the fuel spilled all over the ground caught alight. As the Chinese tank crew hurriedly escaped from their damaged tank the flames rushed across the ground and engulfed our little tank. The remains of its rubber coated tracks and wheels started to burn. Still Itch didn't come out. Even if she did she'd be dead. There were several guns pointing at the tank, ready to shoot anyone who climbed out.

Chapter Twenty Eight

I was staring so hard at the screen, willing Itch to get out and beginning to tear up at the growing realisation that she never would, that I barely noticed the van wobble slightly as Ginny jumped out. Alex had turned up with Marcie on the back and Ginny was in a hurry to hug her in relief and check she was OK.

“The building's on fire now,” reported Clark.

I forced myself to look away from the remains of our tank, engulfed in burning diesel, and saw Alex looking in through the side door.

“Wayne's still back at the gates,” he said. “Itch hasn't come out yet. I'm going back.”

I stared at him, unable to take in what he was saying. All I could think was that someone had to tell him about Itch, they were a couple, after all.

“Alex,” I said, my voice shaking, “Alex, I, umm, listen, about Itch ...”

“Just a sec,” he said, looking down McEvoy Road with a broad grin. “Back in a mo.”

“Alex, wait,” I said, reaching out to take his arm but he'd already gone.

“We need to get out of here,” said Clark urgently. “There's a bunch of helicopter gunships heading our way.”

“Where did Alex go?” I said, leaning forward to look out of the side door. “What the hell?”

Alex was some way down the road locked in a passionate embrace with someone.

“Itch?” I shouted, scrambling to get out of the van. “Itch?”

“We've gotta go!” shouted Clark, tossing his drone remote into the

back end of the van. "Get back here!"

I flung my arms wildly in the air in an agony of confusion, not knowing what to do. I desperately wanted to run and hug Itch and thank every god in existence for her return but gunships were coming and Wayne was still at the Data Centre. Then I realised I could hear the faint sirens of fire engines. We really did need to get out of there as it was about to get crowded. We could talk later.

"You two, get back here" I shouted at Alex and Itch. "We've gotta go! Immediately! Marcie ..." and I turned back to the van, "... go get Wayne, tell him to dump the bike. Ginny, get back in the van. Come on everyone!"

Marcie dashed off to deal with Wayne. Alex and Itch came running up. Alex made straight for his bike but I told him to dump it as well. It had occurred to me that the bikes had probably been visible in the livestream so they were a liability now. A solitary old van would stand a better chance of getting away. In fact we'd probably need to get some new transport after today but that would have to wait.

Itch and Alex piled into the van with me close behind and Ginny reversed the van around the remains of the dragon to get closer to the corner. Marcie appeared, running fast then a second or so later Wayne appeared, running more slowly and waving his gun alarmingly. She scrambled into the back as well and Wayne jumped into the front, narrowly missing shooting Ginny. Fortunately her window was open.

"Oops, sorry," he said, slamming the door shut. "Fire engines are on the way, I could hear them. Still a couple of streets away though."

Ginny dumped the clutch and the van roared off up McEvoy Road, following our planned escape route.

"I think I see the gunships," reported Clark, looking out the back window. "I see four, no, five of them, still some way off."

We all lurched to the side as Ginny sped around a corner to head for the freeway.

“Is anyone following us?” I called.

“No,” said Clark, “although I’ve no idea if the gunships have us on their systems.”

“Keep watching them,” I said, “and let me know if any of them come after us.”

What we’d do if one of them did I had no idea. We weren’t equipped to fight a helicopter gunship. Still, that wasn’t important for the moment.

“Itch,” I said emotionally and grabbed her in a hug. “We thought we’d lost you. How did you get away? We didn’t see you get out and the tank was on fire.”

“I got out after Marcie,” she said, extricating herself from me. “I went through the wall behind the tank into the neighbouring property then jumped over their fence to get into the road behind.”

“But you were still firing the gun,” I said. “You couldn’t possibly have got out.”

“Obviously I did,” she said, applying logic ruthlessly, “as I am here now. I used my shoes to wedge the firing button down so the tank kept firing every time its gun coils recharged. I just hoped that it would continue to aim at the other tank or the building and not send those explosive disks all over Sydney.”

“Fortunately it did,” I said, trying not to imagine what the impact of that would have been. “Although the last one set fire to the diesel tank.”

“Yes,” she said. “I saw the flames and surmised that was what had happened. I apologise for rupturing the diesel tank but I imagine the burning of the fuel will mitigate any environmental damage.”

“I think it’s safe to say the Data Centre has been destroyed,” I said. “Clark, is the drone still filming?”

"Doubt it," he said. "Its batteries are only good for ten minutes or so. Its probably crashed and burned but I'll see if one of the other drones has put anything online later."

"What other drones?" I asked. "I remember you said another one had turned up but there were more?"

"A second arrived just before the fire," he said. "That one might have been military but it might not have been. Didn't have any markings but that doesn't prove anything."

"Is it following us?" I asked.

"No idea," he said, looking out the back window again. "It'd be too small to see if it hung back. Good news though is that the helicopters are circling back there and not coming this way."

* * *

Ordinarily we kept to back streets when we travelled but we figured there'd be safety in numbers if we managed to get away so our escape route basically entailed following the freeway into the centre of Sydney then getting onto the Pacific Highway heading north. One little old van amongst all the other vans, utes, trucks and caravans heading out of town would be almost invisible as we made our way up the coast aiming for Queensland. For a while the atmosphere inside the van was euphoric as Marcie and Itch talked about their shock and horror to discover another, considerably bigger, tank and how they'd gone in an instant from feeling invincible to extremely vulnerable and we all filled Wayne and Alex in on the details of the tank battle, each of us remembering different details. Still, as the kilometres rolled by and Ginny, Wayne and Marcie shared the driving our euphoria turned to exhaustion and, despite the cramped conditions with all seven of us in the van again, most of us fell asleep, proud of what we had achieved but emotionally drained. Somewhere around Coffs Harbour we headed inland to find a hidey hole in the mountains and come to terms with the fact that, against expectations, we hadn't been caught. We were still at large and we needed to formulate some plans.

* * *

“Well, bugger me sideways,” said Clark the next day. He'd just got up and was starting to play with his computer.

“Oh, not again,” said Alex with a grin. “You're insatiable!”

“You what?” said Clark, frowning at him, incomprehension written all over his face.

“Forget it,” said Alex, picking up his coffee mug. He winked at me and I smiled. Clark didn't have much of a sense of humour and he didn't always understand the literal meaning of some of the expressions he used.

“What have you come across?” I asked. Clark rarely spoke when he was on his computer so it must be something of great significance, if only to him. I was feeling relaxed and happy.

“Remember I said there was a DDOS counter attack against our servers yesterday,” he said, looking back down at his computer. “Well, it wasn't.”

“Not really,” I said. “There was a lot going on. What's a DDOS counter attack?”

“Distributed Denial of Service,” he said, tapping his forefingers on the plastic in front of the keyboard. “It's when someone tries to overload your server by firing huge amounts of meaningless data at the server from a lot of other places. Bit like a bunch of people playing hoses on you from all sides. If there's too much coming in the server overloads and shuts down.”

“Oh, OK,” I said. “That seems like a good way to attack a computer.”

“It is,” he said. “It's been going on for years and no one's really figured out an effective way to stop it.”

“So did it work?” I asked. “Did our server get shut down? Where was our server anyway? I didn't know we had one.”

“We had three,” he said. “I told you yesterday.”

"I guess I forgot," I said. "Oh, just a minute. Is this anything to do with that website you had written all over the live video stream?"

Clark looked wearily over his glasses at me. "Yes," he said in that tone of voice you use when trying to explain something to an unusually stupid child. "I set up a website in Canada to host the recording of the live stream and mirrored it to servers in South Africa and Belgium."

"OK, great," I said. "So did they all get shut down?"

"No, none of them," he said. "It wasn't a DDOS attack. I just assumed the Chinese would be onto it quickly and try to shut down our broadcast but they don't seem to have done anything at all, at least not to us anyway. They might have done something to the stream of the other drones if they were streaming."

"I hope they're not in trouble," I said.

"Nothing we can do about it," said Clark brutally. "Do you want to know what happened to us or not?"

I wanted to say 'not really' since I didn't understand a lot of what Clark said about computers but I thought it best to be encouraging so I lied.

"We did get swamped," he said happily. "Not enough to shut anything down but it was a hell of a lot of data regardless."

"So if it wasn't the Chinese, who was it?" I asked. "Who else would care enough to attack us?"

"It wasn't an attack," he said. "It was emails and text messages. That's why I set up the website. In case anyone wanted to be supportive."

"And were they supportive?" I asked, leaning forward. This was actually quite interesting.

"Mostly," he said. "Although there's a really snotty one from ACT NOW! saying that we are a disgrace and that we've done irreparable harm to the movement, whatever that is, and a couple of the later

ones are complaining that with the surveillance system down they're going to sue us for any thefts from their businesses."

I laughed. "Frankly, being sued is the least of my worries," I said, "and ACT NOW! can go jump off a cliff for all I care. They're just a bunch of tossers. But the rest were supportive? How many were there anyway?"

"They're still coming in," he said, "but in the twenty seven or so hours since we went live we've had nearly half a million messages."

"You're joking," I said in astonishment. "Half a million?"

"Yeah," he said. "It'll take a while to go through them and I reckon we'll probably get a lot more as word spreads. Only a proportion of people will have been online yesterday."

"Wow," I said, blinking hard.

"What are they saying?" asked Alex. "Are they all Australians?"

"A lot are from overseas," said Clark, "but a lot are Australian. Quite a few that I've looked at have offered money to help our cause. There's one here from an outfit calling themselves The Bunyip Bazookas saying they want to join us but they don't say where they are, which is sensible."

"Never heard of them," said Alex. "Anyone else?"

The others shook their heads. I hadn't either.

"Ohh, what's this?" said Clark, scrolling rapidly through a list. "Something about war. Ah, no. It's a group called the West Australian Rebels. They're really impressed at what we did and they want to ally with us as well. Seems like Nat's Crew is getting a bit of a reputation."

"And rightly so," said Wayne. "Seeing as how none of them has done much."

"There's one here from a group in Taiwan," said Clark continuing to

scroll. "I don't know what it says as it's in Chinese but I'm pretty sure the Chinese invaded Taiwan at the same time they invaded us, didn't they? Oh, and there's one from the Tassie Tigers. Some outfit in America is offering to send us a shipload of guns and ammunition if Nat will publicly come out in support of the Republican Army."

"No chance of that," I said. "We've enough problems here without getting involved in the American Civil War."

"Anyone heard of Roscoe Ridge Renegades?" asked Clark. He looked around as we shook our heads again. "Well, they want to join us too. Seems they've got some awesome targets but don't know how to take them out and want our input. This one looks interesting. It's from a woman who's offering her services and she's sent a picture. Ahh, no, maybe not."

Clark had gone red and was scrolling on rapidly.

"What services?" asked Wayne. "Can I see her picture?"

"I've lost it," said Clark. "Here's another one offering money. Says he can put five million yawns into any account we nominate."

"That's a lot of money," I said.

"Try and find that one from that woman again," said Wayne. "She sounded interesting."

"We could do things with that kind of money," I said. "Save us having to steal things. Anyone know how to buy weapons?"

"I knew a guy who could get you a handgun," said Wayne. "Few years back, mind."

"I'm sure we could find out if we wanted to," said Itch. "Do you have a plan?"

"No," I said, "just an idle thought. Any more interesting ones, Clark?"

"It'll take days to go through them all," he said. "I wonder how movie

stars process all their fan mail?"

"They have teams of secretaries," said Alex. "Maybe we should use some of that money to hire some."

"What's half a million divided by seven?" I asked.

"Approximately seventy thousand," said Itch. "If we divide the messages up between us and spend one second on each it will take us around twenty hours to go through them."

"And they're still coming in," said Clark. "A couple of thousand have come in while we've been having this conversation. I guess I could set up a filter to separate the Aussie ones from the overseas ones then do some keyword searches for any that have whatever keywords you want to look for. I never expected this sort of response."

He looked back down at his computer and his face fell.

"What is it?" I asked.

"An email came in two minutes ago," he said. "You won't like who it's from."

"I hope it's not Li Hong," I joked. "It would freak me out if he wants to join us as well."

"Worse," said Clark. "It's from Bram."

"And what does that turd want?" I asked.

"He wants a meeting with you," said Clark. "Seems he has some information that might interest you."

"As if," I scoffed. "He probably just wants to get in with the Chinese by betraying us again. Tell him to go to hell."

"OK," said Clark and started typing on his computer.

"Cancel that," I said, changing my mind. "Just delete it. Don't give the

bastard the satisfaction of a rejection.”

“OK,” said Clark, cancelling his reply. “There’s one here from a guy called Wally who wants to follow your example and set up a rebel group called Wally’s Crew. He’s asking for advice.”

“Jesus, how would I know,” I said. I thought about it for a moment. “I’m tempted to tell him to only link up with people he trusts but look at what happened to us. I sort of trusted Bram and he betrayed us and I didn’t even know you lot when we first got together.”

“But you must have trusted us,” said Ginny. “You wouldn’t have lead us out of that Air Base if you hadn’t. You’d have gone off on your own.”

“I suppose,” I said, “but how can I put that as advice to this guy? Get yourself arrested and then stage a breakout and see who you feel you trust to go with you? Sounds like pretty crappy advice to me.”

“Which actually is a problem we’re going to have to face,” said Marcie.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, we’re still here,” she said, “and we’re probably going to be hunted more intensely than we have been up to now. Maybe we ought to join up with some of those groups who’ve been writing to us.”

“That thought had crossed my mind as well,” I said, “especially if we can get some financial backing. Maybe we can do some more against the Chinese.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but how are we going to know which groups to join with? Who can we trust?”

Chapter Twenty Nine

Clark set up his filters and did his word searches but the messages kept coming in. It was three days before the numbers started to drop off. He even got in touch with one of his hacker friends to see if the friend could write an AI program to help but the friend didn't think it would be worth it. Apparently to be effective AI programs need a lot of data to learn from so until the program had learned it wouldn't be any help and we'd have to be teaching it as well as looking through the messages. It was a bit of a Catch-22 situation. Still, long term, we weren't expecting vast amounts of mail so we gritted our teeth and ploughed through the messages that got through the filters and word searches. Every now and then we sent a tentative reply to the offer of money or assistance or alliance. I think we were all reluctant to make any sort of commitment to an outsider without a lot of thinking and investigating.

"Bram's still messaging," said Clark after four days.

"I thought you were blocking his emails," I said, curling my upper lip.

Clark shrugged. "He keeps changing his address. I've tried blocking on content as well but he's changed that too. He still wants to meet you and give you something."

"Probably a bullet," I said. "Tell him to get lost. I'm never going to meet him again."

"OK," said Clark.

"I don't know why he keeps messaging," I said to no one in particular.

"Maybe he thinks you'll forgive him," said Ginny. "Plenty of men are arrogant enough to believe that."

"Maybe," I said, "but I would have thought he'd have more sense."

"He must be desperate," said Clark. "He's replied already. Do you know someone called Liam?"

I froze. "Liam? What? Did he say something about Liam?"

"I guess you do," said Clark. "Bram says he wants to join your outfit and he'll give you Liam's last article in exchange. What's that all about?"

"Oh Jesus," I said. My heart did a double flip then started to pound.

"Sounds like there's something you ain't told us," said Wayne, looking over. "Who's this Liam fella?"

"Liam was her partner," hissed Ginny.

"You mean the one that got ...?" said Wayne.

"Yes," interrupted Ginny, shaking her head at him. Obviously she didn't want the word 'executed' bandied around.

"Wasn't he a journalist or something?" asked Alex.

"Yes," I said, gazing into the distance, my mind blank. "He wrote an article soon after the invasion and they executed him. It's all right. You can say that word now. I can handle it."

"I thought no one had the article," said Itch. "Didn't you say Bram made contact with you hoping to find it?"

"Yes," I said. "I didn't have it. He must have found Ming."

"Who's Ming?" asked Wayne.

"I don't know," I said. "But I told Bram I remembered Liam saying he was going to see someone called Ming about something."

"Maybe it was this Ming that got him arrested," said Itch.

"It's possible," I said, "but it was some time before he was arrested. I had a feeling Ming was a contact or source or something."

"It doesn't really matter now," said Wayne. "The big question is do we

believe Bram has this article.”

“Actually it isn't,” said Clark. “The big question is whether we care or not. If we don't I'll tell Bram to eff off but if we do we're going to have to decide what to do about it.”

They all looked at me since I was the only one who would be remotely interested in an unpublished eight year old news article and then really only for sentimental reasons.

“Tell him,” I said huskily then paused to clear my throat. “Tell him that he will never be part of this group and that if I ever see him again I'll kill him as a traitor. With my bare hands if I have to.”

“OK,” said Clark and started typing.

“Wait,” said Marcie. “Are you sure about this, Nat?”

“Sure I'm sure,” I said. “I never want to see that bastard again.”

“No, I don't mean that,” said Marcie. “I mean the article. There must be something in it that Bram thinks is worth bargaining with. He must know you'd have difficulty trusting him.”

“She has a point,” said Itch thoughtfully.

“So what are you saying?” I asked. “You think I should let him join us? That's never going to happen.”

“Why not tell him you've put a contract on him,” said Wayne, “and that you'll cancel it if he gives you the article.”

“What do you mean, a contract?” I said.

“You know, to kill him,” said Wayne. “He's seen what we did to the Data Centre. He'll probably believe that you're out to get him and he just might use the article to bargain for his life.”

“It seems rather pointless to me,” I said. “How will we know Bram didn't write it himself?”

"If it's got some important information in it," said Itch, "which it may not but assuming it is worth bargaining for then we should be able to check it in some way. I would imagine it is of great significance as the Chinese arrested Liam and executed him for it."

"I'm still not meeting him," I said vehemently. "Look what happened last time. This could just be a trick to try to catch us again. I'm willing to bet he doesn't have the article."

"I saw a TV show like this once," said Alex. "Some kidnappers wanted to get their hands on the ransom money but were afraid of being caught at the handover. What they did was arrange a meeting at a public telephone. When whoever it was arrived to hand over the money they phoned him and gave him another meeting place and barely enough time to get there and at that second place they phoned with instructions for a third place. We could do something like that so that the Chinese wouldn't have any idea where to lay an ambush. They'd have to follow him and that would leave time for us to get away before they turned up, especially if the final meeting place was in a wide open space."

* * *

"Well, that was one hell of a rigmarole," said Bram angrily when he finally arrived at the fourth meeting point, beside the esplanade at Surfer's Paradise. It was early in the day and there were no pedestrians around although there was a fair amount of traffic on the road and a surprising number of people surfing. He was red faced and sweating as he'd had to run a little and the day was humid as a storm was brewing.

"We don't trust you," I said, keeping my gun under my jacket but showing it to him. "In fact you're lucky to still be alive."

"It wasn't my fault," he said, his eyes narrowing. "ACT NOW! made me do it to cosy up to the Chinese. That's why I left them and want to join you. Their priorities have changed."

"It's a shame you didn't leave them before betraying us," I said evenly, "rather than after, but we don't trust you and never will. How did you

get Liam's article?"

"We tracked down Ming," he said.

"And who is he or she?" I asked. "And why did Ming have Liam's article?"

"Sorry," he said. "I'll explain everything and give you the article only if you agree to let me join you as your second in command. You'll need an intelligence officer anyway. My specialism is information."

"I never knew you had such a sense of humour," I said. "You see that large man over there?" I pointed off to the left to where Wayne was leaning against a lamppost, sipping a takeaway latte.

Bram looked over and Wayne smiled and let his jacket swing open to reveal a gun.

"And that lady at the bus stop over there?" This time I pointed to Marcie. She, too, had a gun which she let Bram see.

"Your point?" he asked.

"You have one minute," I said conversationally, glancing at my phone. "If you give me the article before the end of the minute you can leave alive. If not, one of us will shoot you right here. That's the only deal I'm making."

He looked over at Wayne and Marcie again before looking back at me.

"I don't have it with me," he said.

"That's a shame," I said. "Forty five seconds."

He stepped backwards two paces.

"Feel free to run," I said. "They aren't the only ones and you might have a very slim chance of escaping. Thirty seconds."

"But Nat," he said, "for old time's sake. Come on, let's go to a nice

cafe and have a quiet chat.”

“No,” I said. “You did nothing when I was arrested myself and you betrayed us in Sydney. Fifteen seconds.”

“You’ve changed,” he said, his shoulders sagging. “You’ve got hard.”

“You’d better believe it,” I said. I held up my phone. “Umm, five, four, three, two ...”

“OK, OK,” he said hurriedly. “Call them off.”

I held up my phone to signal to the others to hold off for a while. The signal to kill him was for me to drop the phone.

“Well?” I said.

“I’ve got it here, on a USB stick,” he said holding up his brief case. “It’s in my bag.”

“Stand still,” I said, twitching my gun. “Don’t make a move.”

He froze.

“Now,” I said. “Very slowly, open the bag then empty it on the ground.”

Slowly he undid the fasteners to the brief case and upended it. Three mobile phones and a USB stick fell out.

“Is that the USB stick?” I asked.

He nodded slowly.

“OK,” I said. “Back away ten paces.”

He backed away ten paces. A young man carrying a surf board gave us a strange look as he passed but he didn’t stop. I slowly walked forward and retrieved the USB stick.

“How do I know it's not packed with explosives?” I asked.

“It's too small,” he said. “You couldn't get enough in there to do much damage.”

“You could be right,” I said, “but you could be lying as well. You see that blue Dongfeng car over there?”

I nodded towards the small electric car parked on the side of the road.

“The door's open and there's a notebook computer on the front seat. Go and plug the stick in.”

I tossed the USB stick towards him and it fell on the sand near his feet. “Go on.”

He stepped forward slowly and picked up the USB stick then walked to the car. I retreated and got behind another parked car, just in case. Bram open the door and lifted the notebook out. He put it on the roof of the car and made a show of inserting the USB stick. Nothing happened.

“Happy now?” he asked.

“Ecstatic,” I said, emerging from behind my parked car. “OK. Leave the notebook and the stick where they are. You can go now.”

He looked around to check that Wayne and Marcie were still where they were. They weren't, of course. We'd half suspected there might be explosives inside the briefcase or USB stick and they'd got themselves out of the way, just in case.

“My bag and phones?” he asked.

“Just go,” I said. “Be happy you're still alive.”

“It's a shame,” he said. “We'd have made a good team.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but I have a great team now. We don't need you. Shit, we don't even want you. Get lost.”

He hesitated then turned and walked stiffly away, no doubt expecting a bullet in his back. I hoped never to see him again.

* * *

"It's not even encrypted," said Clark, half an hour later, having performed extensive virus checks on the USB stick while we headed back into New South Wales in a different car. "What a tosser."

"Where was the need to encrypt it?" I asked. "He was expecting to give us the file anyway. So what do you think?"

"It's an old fashioned Word 12 document," he said, "not that that means anything. There's no author in the properties which makes sense and there don't seem to be any embedded viruses. It seems safe enough to read." He passed me the notebook.

"Thanks," I said and shut the notebook.

"Aren't you going to read it?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, feeling very emotional. "Liam died because of this and I ..."

I went quiet and just sat there, hugging the notebook and thinking about Liam. Clark, to his credit, didn't say anything. He might even had understood.

* * *

The article totally blew me away. I read it later that afternoon when I'd finally plucked up the courage and it was mind blowing. No wonder the Chinese executed Liam. It started by asking the question about how the Chinese had managed to get the Fourteen Rivers Project up and running so quickly. Major civil construction projects take years of planning yet the Chinese were apparently able to get started in only a matter of weeks, something they had extensively boasted about in political broadcasts. Liam then answered that question by explaining that the Chinese had in fact been purchasing the land for years and had already done the surveying before the

invasion had taken place. All that remained was to assemble the equipment and labour and start work. He went on to ask 'How had this been possible?' and answered himself by explaining that the Chinese had been planning the invasion since at least the year 2000 and quite possibly longer. All they had been waiting for was a suitable opportunity and the collapse of the USA had provided just that opportunity.

The real substance of the article began about a third of the way through. According to Liam, there had been no invasion, no massive sea battle leading to our surrender. It had all been a gigantic con designed to make the Australian population more accepting. The thinking had been that if the Australian navy had been overwhelmed then the civilian population would put up little resistance. The reality was that the Chinese had bought off twenty two of the twenty four members of the Cabinet. They had each sold out Australia for a paltry Au\$200m each and a guaranteed comfortable life in China for them and their families. The other two members of the Cabinet, Callie Atkins and Brendan Berenson, had been executed for refusing.

I vaguely remembered Callie Atkins and Brendan Berenson. We'd all assumed at the time that all the members of the Cabinet had been executed and only those two had been found but this wasn't the case. The others were alive and well and living in The Bund in Shanghai, Century Park in Pudong and The Peak in Hong Kong, all very exclusive locations for the elite in China. Liam even had their addresses.

"You've gone very pale," said Ginny, who was watching me read. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm ... stunned," I said, staring at the screen, "and I think I'm going to get angry, very angry, when it finally sinks in."

"Oh my word!" she exclaimed. "What does it say? Is it really terrible?"

"It's worse than terrible," I said slowly. "I'm still having trouble processing it."

"Can I read it?" asked Alex.

"In a moment," I said, "I need to read it again."

"Why don't you read it out loud?" said Wayne. "This suspense is effing getting to me."

There were comments when I started to read but the further along I got the quieter they all became and when I'd finished we all sat in silence. The enormity of it was almost too much to comprehend.

"Bastards!" exclaimed Wayne suddenly, hitting the ground with his fist. "As if all their bloody pork barrelling and graft wasn't enough they effing sold us out to the effing Chinese! I never had no respect for politicians but this ... Jesus!"

"I don't believe it," said Ginny. "How could our own government do such a thing to us? I can't believe it."

"It does explain things," said Alex slowly. "I always wondered how our forces got blown away so quickly and why the top politicians disappeared so suddenly."

"And for only two hundred mil?" said Marcie. "Surely we're worth more than that?"

"There's 22 of 'em," said Clark. "That's 4 and a half billion all up. Mind you, it was a bargain for the Chinese. An actual war would have cost a trillion or two."

"And it does explain why ACT NOW! were looking for it," said Itch, "and why they've not done anything with it now they have it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's about legitimacy," said Itch. "Before we took out the Data Centre I did some research on how insurgents can win and I found an article¹ written by someone at the Naval Postgraduate School in California. He'd analysed a large number of rebellions since the end of World

1 Major Christopher L Watkins; How Insurgents Win: Examining The Dynamics Of Modern Insurgencies; Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey California, June, 2014.

War II and concluded that the biggest factor in whether or not the insurgents win is their legitimacy.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to get my brain away from Liam’s article and to focus on Itch.

“We’re insurgents,” she said. “The Chinese invaded and we’re rebelling against them. I wanted to know if rebels can ever win against the massive resources of a conquering invader or if we were a hopeless case.”

“Did that article cover your own government selling you out?” asked Alex. “That would make it seem pretty hopeless to me.”

“I am not Australian,” said Itch, “although I have a fondness for your country but that makes it easier for me to remain detached. It seems to me that if that person who wrote about insurgents is right then whoever has the greatest legitimacy has the greatest power and by putting it out that they won the right to govern Australia through an unequivocal military defeat the Chinese won the, how do you put it in the West?, the hearts and minds of the people.”

“You’re talking crap,” growled Wayne. “They ain’t never won our hearts and minds.”

“Perhaps not your hearts,” said Itch, “but your minds certainly. There has been little serious resistance after the first few days and being defeated is a significant psychological suppressant.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but what’s that got to do with ACT NOW!?”

“I would assume that the leaders of ACT NOW! did similar research,” said Itch, “and knew they had to find something that gave them greater legitimacy to govern than the Chinese hence their search for Liam’s article. No doubt they also identified other possibilities to search for but the treachery of your government would certainly undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese. Defeat is one thing but betrayal is another and if ACT NOW! released that information it would have given them legitimacy in the eyes of the general population.”

"I'm sorry," said Marcie, "but what is all this legitimacy crap?"

"I am not certain," said Itch, "but I think it refers to the willingness of the general public to help the insurgents. If the rebels are legitimate then they will be able to get recruits, information and other resources and, of course, few, if any, will inform against them. Without that underlying support the rebels can't get recruits and their every move will be reported."

"So why didn't ACT NOW! release the article?" asked Ginny.

"Because they have changed their agenda," said Itch. "Their objective now is to lobby the Chinese for change and very possibly find active roles for their leaders within the Chinese government of Australia. They now want legitimacy for the Chinese not for any insurgent movement."

"So why would Bram give the article to us?" I asked. "Wouldn't he want to suppress it?"

"Clark's Korean friend said Bram had ambitions in politics," said Itch. "No doubt he has sensed a change with the public reaction to our destruction of the Data Centre and wanted to switch to the rising power with the aim of subverting it to his objectives."

"What rising power?" I asked.

"Us," said Itch. "The article on insurgents said that another major factor in success was the demonstration of the rebels' power through spectacular attacks. I am not one to boast but I venture that our attack on the Data Centre was vastly more spectacular than anything any other group has done."

"Oh come on!" I exclaimed, my aghast horror at Liam's article temporarily in the back of my mind. "Surely you're not saying that we are a major force to be reckoned with?"

"We have achieved a spectacular outcome," said Itch. "We have received a massive outpouring of support and offers of recruits and finance. I would say that we are most certainly a potential force to be

reckoned with.”

“But there's only seven of us!” I exclaimed. “We're not a force for anything!”

“That doesn't matter,” said Alex unexpectedly. “It's all about perceptions. There's no denying that most of Australia has now heard of Nat's Crew. ACT NOW! has lost most if not all the support it once had and none of the other groups have achieved anything. I think Itch is right.”

“Me too,” said Wayne. “Straight up.”

“Nat's Crew Says Screw You!” sang Marcie happily. “We got us a slogan!”

“What do you think, Clark?” I asked.

“Wouldn't have a clue,” he said, shaking his head. “I was eleven when the Chinese turned up. I don't really remember what it was like before that. Be nice to be on the winning team though. Never got picked to be on anyone's team before, let alone a winning one.”

“So what else did that thing say, Itch?” I asked. “Did it mention anything about the side with the most weapons?”

“Actually it did,” she said.

“Hah! Thought so,” I said. “There's more guns in the Chinese army than there are people in Australia. So what did it say?”

“It said that didn't matter,” said Itch. “Like when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Afghans were heavily out-resourced and out-numbered but still won. If we have legitimacy we can get the support. We can get recruits and with the finance we've been offered we can get the weapons, perhaps from Europe. This article gives us legitimacy.”

“This has become very surreal,” I said. “You make it sound like we can actually defeat the Chinese.”

“Anything is possible,” said Itch. “Don’t forget one other important thing. Insurgents always have the initiative. The Chinese will always be reacting because they’ll never know what we are going to do next and sooner or later it will no longer be worth their while staying here.”

“She’s right,” said Wayne. “In a fight it’s always the one who has the initiative who controls it and wins.”

“OK, OK,” I said, holding up my hands placatingly. “Even if all this is true, what do we do with Liam’s article? We don’t have legitimacy until everyone knows about it. So do we send a copy to everyone in Australia?”

“That would seem like a good first step,” said Itch, “although we ought to get it seen overseas as well if we want external support.”

“So how do we do that?” I asked.

“I could probably do that,” said Clark.

“No,” said Alex. “A lot of people won’t bother to read it or if they do they won’t believe it. We need to present it in a way that gives it legitimacy as well.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” I said. “This is getting ridiculous. How do we make legitimacy legitimate?”

He stared at the ground for a while then slapped his knee and beamed at me.

“You do it,” he said, pointing a finger. “You have to give the public a face if you want them to support a rebellion and you’re perfect. You’re Nat and the leader of Nat’s Crew and everyone, well, almost everyone, will have seen Nat’s Crew take out the Data Centre. If you go on TV or social media and explain who you are, who Liam was and what the article says about how our government betrayed us, you’ll be the face of the Australian Revolution and people will flock to your banner. You’ll be our first woman Prime Minister! You’ll be a symbol that unites us all against our common enemy!”

“There was what's her name,” said Wayne, drily. “You know, Julia Gillard.”

“Oh, yeah, OK,” said Alex. “Then Nat can be our first Australian Revolutionary Prime Minister.”

“Me? On TV?” I said, going numb in panic. “Oh shit! I've got nothing to wear!”