

## **Prologue: “The Prisoner”**

He became conscious, shivering, strapped, on his back, naked to a wooden table in the center of the cellar. The faint aroma of beeswax kissed his nostrils, entwined with the stench of rot and damp. The place was a hold of shadow and debris. Broken furniture, cardboard boxes, bundles of newspapers, and a rusted hot water heater contended for space with a shovel, rakes and balding brooms. A poster of a head in a leather mask was on the wall near the door. Patched with filth, the mouth and eyes were sealed with crosses of stitching. The heavy wooden door alongside it—in the corner beyond his feet—was painted crimson. A dim, red light bulb above the door was the only source of illumination.

Through the door, he could hear the beat of music played far too loud.

He strained against the bonds. It was no use. The leather straps pinched his skin.

“Hello?”

He couldn't remember anything—his name, memories had been stolen, and random thoughts misfired, confusing him, causing concern.

His stomach gurgled loudly. He needed to pee.

“Hello? Is there anybody there?”

He cried out again, but the door wasn't answering. Hairy caterpillars were crawling down his throat and nesting in his lungs. Dread waited in the darkness and wanted to descend. He felt vulnerable, cold. He shuddered. His teeth began to chatter.

The hairy grubs knotted into balls at the base of his throat as he tried to make sense of the threads of memory in his brain. None of it made any sense. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. Maybe he'd been drugged?

A sore throbbed in his groin.

“Help me, please.” His voice was dry and feeble. He tried to crane his head backward, and a neuralgic pain hammered like a nail into his skull.

“Shit.”

A sibilant whisper—behind, beyond sight. The scrape of a foot over dirt—a watcher changing positions in the dark.

“Help me.”

Silence.

“For God's sake, let me go, please!” His voice sounded broken and distraught. “I'll give you anything, if you only let me go!”

The watcher coughed, took a step forward. A bulky shadow peeled away from the wall.

He remembered a girl, a woman with eyes like pearls shining with a light of their own.

Nails gouging skin amidst promises of rapture.

There were scratches on his chest, and they stung.

Hot, salty lips, and her tongue as she kissed him. Although she wasn't his type, he'd enjoyed it and begged for more.

She'd asked him home.

He remembered saying yes.

He strained his head backward to better see his companion. The back of his skull pressed against the wood.

The outline of the watcher advanced—misshapen—one shoulder higher than its twin, dressed in a misbegotten linen jacket that looked as if it had been recovered from the racetrack of a monster truck derby. There came the stink of sweat and too much cologne. Unkempt hair dangled, obscuring his features. Soiled bandages covered his jaw.

And there were eyes glimmering through those greasy locks: silver and black, fathomless like water at the bottom of a well.

"Please, I'll give you anything. I don't know who you are, but whatever I did, I didn't bloody know." He twisted and strained—the straps chafed his ankles, dug into his wrists. "God, please! Anything."

Fingers like pitons uncurled over his shoulders. The nails sank slowly into his muscles, liquefying skin with a caustic caress.

The watcher pressed downward and pinned him to the wood. Sour breath came from beneath the hair.

"God! No!"

He looked up: crimson light stained the watcher's hair and shoulders. He pleaded and begged for release. Sometime later, he wept and screamed.

His thoughts became disjointed.

Icy fingers siphoned the last of his will.

With a screech, the cellar door opened.

Somehow, he knew she'd return.

## Chapter 1: “The Caterpillar”

Pete would always remember that caterpillar as if it were an omen. The slender grub marked the moment his life changed, the afternoon when his friendship with Al took a shady detour down a twisted psychological path. The start of a new life some may say. His perception of reality would certainly never be the same.

And Al, well Al, that man, he broke his heart.

“Look at this.” Al was on the other side of the yard in a faded Eels vest and turquoise Bermuda shorts.

Broad-shouldered, with wavy, umber-brown hair and a tuft of a fringe dangling before his eyes, Al had grown up in the Blue Mountains, mostly with his Nan. As a kid, he used to tell people his parents had abandoned him to travel the world, and they were still traveling. Last Al had heard, they were hiking in Tibet. God knows why anyone would want to go to Tibet. A place with nothing but monks, ice and yak milk, and who wants to suckle from the tittie of a yak?

Al was pulling up weeds, and weeds were all that was left of this ruin of a garden, the only thing green at any rate. Weeds, dead rhododendron bushes, a splattering of dead leaves, and sun-baked dirt. It had been a dry summer with nary ten drops of rain, and the blistering days bore skiddies of drought. Al was crouched on his knees, staring into a mesh of wood that had once been a shrub.

Al had always been like that—amused by little things—a child in the overweight body of a man. Shy, withdrawn, traumatized by the stigma of growing up fat. At twenty-nine, he still lived alone. Pete had been teased as a kid too: with a last name like Tate, he’d worn the name *Tater Head* all through school. But Al took the stirring personally. It haunted him still.

Al was a professional. He worked like a thrall, twelve, sixteen hours a day, six days a week as a programmer and made a decent living at it, too. Al was intelligent, you see. A little retarded with his social skills, and that was his handicap in this anthill corporate world: he’d forever be a worker, never a queen. His only concession to luxury was a silver BMW that he kept locked in a ramshackle wooden garage down the side of his house. A garage with peeling white paint, and one window opaque with dirt and dust.

His house was ordinary enough. Dark brick, red-tiled roof, three bedrooms. An investment property. Inside, it had minimalist décor: the insides painted off-white, hardly any furniture, no pictures decorated the walls. Two of the

bedrooms were stacked with old newspapers and boxes of empty beer and wine bottles. Al's house was about as stylish as a crypt, really, which was probably unfair.

At least crypts have cracks on their walls.

Pete was pruning back the rosebushes; hacking stems with a pair of garden shears when Al summoned him over. His bleached hair had brilliant silver highlights in the glare of the sun. The heat was searing. Pete was glad of the distraction and tossed his tool onto the marble-pebble path. He rubbed the sweat from his forehead. His shoulders and arms had turned a ruddy pink. A Mambo singlet and bicycle shorts weren't the most appropriate attire to be laboring in under the Aussie summer sun.

Al was on his knees poking something with his finger. Pete meandered over and slapped the back of his head.

"What's up?"

Al stared into the bush with eyes unblinking. "Look at this," he said, jabbing at the leaves with his pinkie.

And that's when Pete first saw the caterpillar.

A crimson caterpillar edged along a twig. A plague of egg-like blisters infected its body, creamy and glistening like oval pearls. The caterpillar crept towards the end of the stick on a suicidal path, towards open air, towards *nothing*, inch-by-inch, quivering with the exertion of its climb. Arching its slender length, forward, up, holding on for a moment more, forward, up, forward, up. Flesh dissolving by the second into a hundred pinprick jaws.

Al's expression was a mask of intensity, as if *he* were that desperate worm, crawling as a meal, essence liquefied and sucked from his skin, slurped down by parasites, life turning to shit.

Pete frowned. "That's sick, man." He turned away, pretending disinterest. "Not even a grub deserves such a fate."

"You should squash it," Al said, as if he expected Pete to obey.

Pete shook his head. "Grub guts on these hands? I don't think so. I'm no Buddhist, but I don't need bad, worm karma coming my way. The grub's not my problem." He stretched his shoulder muscles, pivoted his hips in a pendulum gait, then wandered away to the roses.

Al's voice was low, almost resonant. "Can't think of anything crueler than being eaten alive." He mashed the caterpillar in his fist.

Pete watched with a puzzled expression. "Lighten up. Nature's ways are like

a woman's: beyond logic, and desperately cruel." Pete crouched to pick up the shears. "Make sure you clean that shit off your skin. You don't know what those bugs were."

Al flicked his fingers and sent grub mash spinning into a privet.

"One less pest in the garden bed."

*Snip, clack.* A rose branch fell away to the ground.

"I should spray." Al studied the yard, slowly turning on the spot.

"Too many poisons contaminating the planet. Tidying up this dirt patch doesn't warrant any more." Pete looked to Al to see how his advice had been received, but Al's face could have been soapstone. "Bit extreme, don't you think?"

Al searched through the dead brush, pulling aside sticks and twigs.

"It's unnecessary. I said I'd help, and here I am, dirty nails and cooked like a truck stop kebab."

Al snapped off a branch.

"Hey, don't get annoyed."

"There's sunscreen inside," Al said. "Use it."

And that was Al's way, tempestuous as an autumn gale and set in his ways. Opinionated to the point of being arrogant, but he'd been Pete's mate forever it seemed, close since kindergarten. Al always had a chip on his shoulder, toting a grudge that everyone else had forgotten. In this case, he simply didn't appreciate Pete's environmental piety dampening his ideas, and Pete knew it.

It was almost amusing.

"Only if you rub me down," Pete said and winked. The shears clipped off another rose branch. "I may look a little red now, but give me wine, shower, and a good night's rest and I'll be gold in your hands, baby, pure gold."

Al turned from the bush and headed towards the sliding door leading to the kitchen at the back of the house. Clumps of dead lilies rustled against his calves, and he systematically kicked over a row of clay flowerpots that contained dead plants. One pot cracked as it hit the edge of a brick and disgorged dry dirt.

The garden itself was set in the backyard of a row of old brick houses. Nineteen-thirties architecture, yards hemmed in by walls of burgundy bricks, twenty minutes to the city and an arterial road out front, an alley down the side. Al scuffed the dirt on the cracked cement path with his feet and danced over runners of buffalo grass crawling towards the wall. Hopping about in his sneakers, he avoided the pale ropes as if they were guillotines that could easily

slice away his toes.

“Water would be nice.”

Al heaved the sliding door open and hesitated before the red satin curtains hanging beyond the glass. “Beer?”

“Water’s fine, buddy. You’re growing tubby, you know?”

Al spat on the path. “Water’s rusty.”

“Juice?”

He flung aside the curtain. “Juice doesn’t quench thirst like a cold one.”

“You’ll never find love with a beer-gut.” Pete waggled his index finger in the air.

The sound of a mug being slammed on the kitchen bench came from inside. The topic of Al’s nonexistent love life was a known sore point, but Pete couldn’t resist being a tease.

Al returned to the door, stubby of beer in hand. He stood just before the curtain and drank, lifting the shrunken bottle above his head, gulping lager, voice box jerking up and down.

“Where’s my juice?” Pete offered a half-laugh. It wasn’t as though he’d sacrificed his Saturday to spend in this shitty garden.

Al wiped his lips and burped. “Out. Beer or rust, buddy, beer or rust. Hey, you can have all the rust you want. Lord knows, my pipes don’t need it.” He tossed the empty stubby into an open garbage bin by the door. “Drink enough, and nine feet under, you’ll never be thirsty again.” He wandered to a shovel lying on the ground beneath the kitchen window, picked it up, and planted its head in the base of a bush with a grunt.

Pete wet his lips with a hot lick. “Met someone last night you might be interested in.”

Al continued shoveling. His eyes were fixed and unblinking. “I’m not gay. Not interested.”

“Give me credit, this one’s female, not she-male. I think you’d like her if ya give her a chance.”

Al worked in silence and didn’t look up—he tossed dirt aside.

“I’m working seventy-two hours a week. Barely got time for you, let alone a date.” Al ripped at the ground with his shovel and glanced up at Pete with one eyebrow arched.

“Well, I’m going to give you her number anyways,” said Pete. “I’ll write it on a Post-It note and stick it in your car. Then you can think about the ass you’re

missing as you drive on in to work.”

Al gave him a look as if a snail had slithered right up inside his pants.

“I hardly ever see you anymore.” Pete licked his lips again and considered going inside for a drink, but settled on tugging the shorts out of his ass. “This one’s different. Promise. Come out with me tonight, I’ll show you a good time. I’ve got her number. We can link up.”

Al continued shoveling, unearthing the roots of a bush. “Nah.” He planted the head of the tool in the ground and leant on its handle. “I’ll stay in, have a few beers, maybe. Watch the footy.”

*Snap, click.* “Pizza and beer, God forbid I become suburban.”

“Yo, ho, cheerio!” Robert Carpenter pushed open the wooden gate and entered the yard from the side entrance. “Men at work—what more could a bitch want?” He tossed Pete one of the two pump-bottles of water he carried. Pete thanked him.

With tight, black, curly hair, Robbie had a confident smile, wore high-cut silk shorts, Adidas joggers, and a long-sleeved, cream silk shirt. Aboriginal, he liked to be admired—male or female—didn’t matter. Robbie worked out at the gym for three to six hours, four days a week, and in his mind, such discipline warranted appreciation. He was Pete’s part-time club troll and party chum, notorious for organizing threesomes with European backpackers and inviting Pete—when the third was male.

“Shit, spare me,” Al said noticing Robbie. “How many you screw this week, Robbie?”

Robbie waved the comment away with one hand. “You wish, Al.” He licked his index finger and stroked it slowly across his hip. “This meat’s too hot for you, baby.”

“Only a matter of time, *Baby*, only a matter of time.” Al stabbed the shovel into the ground. “I’ll give you five years, and you’ll be dead from AIDS,” and this comment brought murmurs of disapproval from Robbie and Pete. “You’re everything I hate about the club scene, Rob, everything.” Al threw aside a heap of dirt.

“Just ignore him. He’s not nasty, it’s the sun.” Pete uncapped his bottle. “Whose bed *have* you been hiding in for the past two weeks?” He suckled at the neck of his bottle.

Robbie drank some water. “I’ve got a new job’s all,” he said and snorted—the air in the yard was heavy with the heat and the musty smell of dirt. Robbie

nodded to Al. "I heard you. If you're going clubbing with my man, I'd better be invited."

Al laughed, and there could have been sand in his mouth from the sound he made. "If you're there, I won't be, buddy." He wiped thick sweat from his brow. "Men aren't as fussy as women, are they? I guess you two wouldn't mind my extra pounds." He slapped his belly.

"You've got nice buns," Robbie replied.

Al put up his hands as if to ward off a blow. "Fuck you."

"Don't mind him," Pete said to Al. "You're a big old teddy bear with a marvelous complexion. Bronze like a Grecian god."

"Tut, tut. You'll make me jealous." Robbie sat down on a low brick wall skirting a crisped patch of lilies. He regarded Al. "I'd kill for a skin like yours." His hand went up to his chin—an angry red pimple was on his cheek.

Al had inherited his Mediterranean looks from his mother, and that was about all he'd ever received from his parents—besides the name Kurk.

Al gave Robbie a humorless stare. "Are you going to help or just sprout crap all day?"

"Not me!" Robbie gesticulated dramatically. "I'm not ruining these clothes. I like to see guys get sweaty." He whistled at Pete. "You're burnt, sweetie. You'll be sore tonight. No mind. I'm the Massage Master."

Pete surveyed the parched garden. "This'll take a month. You'll need bags of fertilizer," he said to Al and sighed. "I don't know why we bother."

"It'll be terrif' once we get rid of these dead plants." Al planted the shovel. "Put in a few tree ferns, some grass, a sprinkler system." He tipped a shovel of dirt. "Have a barbie in the summer."

Pete fetched a spade and joined in digging alongside Al. The pair dug in silence, tossing aside earth into a pile to expose the petrified roots of the bush. "This woman is amazing. I've never quite met anyone like her."

"What?" Al started cutting roots with the shovel blade.

"What were you doing with a woman?" Robbie asked. "You know, if you wet the ground, it makes for easier work," he said then chugged his drink.

"She said she was a woman, but at Blinky's you never know," Pete said. "She's traveling—African. Amber is her name. Been in town for a bit over a month. I think she wanted to pick me up, actually."

"Will they never learn?" Robbie rolled his eyes and offered Pete a smile. "You *are* gorgeous."

"Thanks."

Al groaned. "I think I'll puke."

Pete stretched his back. "Not my type. I like my dick."

Al placed his boot on the base of the bush and with a crack of wood pushed the trunk over, ripping a clump of roots from the ground.

Robert: "And?"

"She needs someone to show her around."

"How convenient." Al was used to Pete's well-intended interference. He took hold of the top of the bush and began dragging it towards a pile of uprooted shrubs clogging the path alongside the house. "Why do you bother when you know I'll say no?"

"You need to get out."

"God knows," Robbie commented into his drink to Al. "You're practically a nun. Heaven forbid, you spend some money and have fun. . . . Fun? What's that?"

Al closed his eyes and sighed deeply as if he were relaxing for meditation.

"Dare I say it?" Robbie said. "You might get laid. Someone has to take care of that cherry of yours. It's a mission of God. If Pete here's not the one to do it, he'll find someone that will."

Al yelped and began jumping around in frantic abandon, slapping his arm, shrieking all the while.

Pete dropped his spade and rushed over.

Al peeled the crushed bullet of a silver and black wasp from the back of his wrist. "Little bugger stung me." He tossed the dead insect away and examined his arm.

Pete examined the wound. "Better get something on that." He gingerly took hold of Al's wrist and led him towards the sliding door.

Al was quiet, his mind obsessing on the venom searing through his wrist, wishing the pain would stop, wishing he was at work, and that thought bothered him more than it should have.

Somewhere along the line, he'd forgotten how to have fun. Somewhere between high school lunch and uni graduation.

Shit, had he ever had fun?

The realization was depressing. Al tried to remember the last time he'd really let himself go. Laughed? Maybe that was the reason he was a pariah? Maybe, he

did have a problem? Hell, had he *ever* been unreservedly happy? His life was a bleak montage of frozen dinners, work, meetings, and beer in front of the telly at night. And in thinking this, he knew he needed a change and needed it bad.

Right now, he wanted it more than breath in his lungs.

“Let’s get pissed tonight,” Al said to Pete, removing his sore arm and placing it around Pete’s shoulders.

“Sounds like a date.” Pete pushed aside the curtain, and the pair maneuvered side by side into the kitchen. They stopped momentarily as their eyes adjusted to the gloomy interior of the house.

Al squeezed his fist to try to deaden the pain. It didn’t work.

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The uniform was chafing away at his skin, or so Constable Ted Denebrae imagined. His wool-blend pants and pale blue shirt were dissolving his epidermis and would eventually reduce him to a flesh-clad skeleton with weeping eyeballs. A thing of bones and guts with no dignity at all—food for all the many parasites of this shit-hole world.

He felt like a cigarette, but he had recently given up—he could no longer afford to smoke. He kept his old flip-top lighter, silver with a golden eagle’s head on its face—a symbol of the past.

Ted suffered through the craving.

He had an anemic complexion, with short pale-brown hair that stood up in a cowlick, pale green eyes, and a penetrating gaze. Ted was busy cordoning off the front yard of a small, dilapidated block of units with yellow tape when a diarrhea-colored Holden pulled into the curb. Nearby police pushed back the gathering crowd. He stopped and turned to watch the expected parade of assholes—the detectives of his former unit. He adjusted his belt with one hand and swore under his breath.

Ted knew it would come to this. He supposed this was exactly how the Lieutenant had intended things to fall—another humiliation in a long succession of humiliations. Shame intended to push Ted into resignation and make that inevitable move into private security. A more courageous man would probably do just that, but not Ted. He was too dog-bone lazy, too old, and too bloody stubborn to make the change.

And sometimes in life, you just have to eat your own shit.

Ted scrutinized the overgrown grass and pushed around rubbish with his foot—old beer bottles and cans disinterred from the weeds. Behind the low brick

wall was a heaped-line of rain-mulched garbage. A Smiths chips wrapper stirred in the breeze by the path.

If only he hadn't screwed the girl.

The scandal was a painful remembrance. Ted had been conducting a routine investigation chasing a pimp by the name of Vinnie Masiollie. Scumbag Vinnie operated a suburban brothel out the back of a local high school. Ted had gone to a residence following up on a lead, and the next thing he knew he was humping Vinnie's ex. Bitch called Sandy; but goddamnit, she had nice tits and an ass like two legs of ham. It had been a bad time in Ted's life, too—his daughter, Amy, had run off to join the Hare Krishnas, and his wife, Barbara, had moved out after *discovering* she was a lesbian. Ted still couldn't understand how a woman could be a lesbian after sixteen years of marriage, but shit happens, hey?

Of course, Sandy had been a setup—a pupil at the nearby school and only fifteen going on thirty-five. Vinnie videotaped the whole fuck-fest and tried to blackmail Ted. Threatened to get him charged with statutory rape. Not knowing what to do, Ted had come clean to his Lieutenant, trying to do the right thing—bad mistake. Vinnie fled the state, and Ted had been demoted. Here Ted was nine months later, putting up yellow tape so people didn't walk on the fucking lawn. Skulking outside the windows of a murder scene like a mongrel that had caught the scent of blood.

Ted knew he had to get inside. He'd find a way to reclaim his life.

"Arvo, Ted." Detective Jack Halmes slammed the car door. Dressed in a wrinkled, brown business suit, he wore a pink silk tie with bright yellow spots—a gift from his wife most likely. His hair was threaded with gray, wavy and curled about his ears like clusters of dead baby's breath. He was tall, and overweight, and in many ways reminded Ted of a butler with his dangling ape-arms and sorrowful disposition. A worn eye patch covered one eye, and the sagging jowl on the left side of his face was matted with doodles of maroon scar tissue. Trophies from a pooch-screw drug bust in which Sid Tong had tried to take off Halmes' face with a sawn-off. Halmes had gone down screaming, the skin from his jaw blown clean off. Somehow, he managed to put a slug in Tong's brain before he hit the floor.

The other detective was small by comparison, and Ted didn't recognize him. Fit and muscular, he wore an over-priced navy blue suit and tight trousers. The bastard walked with a swagger and one of those arrogant expressions as if he were King Burger on Paddy-shit hill. He nodded at Ted and sided up to Halmes

at the bottom of the path. There was a low-voiced conversation between the two, and the smaller man took out a notepad and walked inside.

Halmes watched him go then looked at Ted. "How's life treatin' ya, ya sorry bugger?"

Ted slowly approached his old partner. "Seen better days." He took Halmes' hand and patted him on the shoulder. "You're looking good though."

"Same shit, different day." Halmes smiled, and so did Ted.

Halmes was good like that, always made a person feel comfortable in his presence. Ted and Halmes went way back—weekend barbeques, birthdays, Christmas. . . . Hell, they even went on vacation once together to Fiji with their respective families. They'd been close until Ted's balls up, but then that's not hard—it's often a bit incestuous in the forces.

No other bugger wants to know you if you're a cop.

"So what ya got?" Ted asked. "Another one, I hear?"

Halmes' look turned serious. He was trying to figure out what Ted was getting at with the question probably. "Been inside?"

"No . . . no, but I've heard it's another mutilation. Bloody one from all accounts. Forensics have been here for quite a bit. What took ya so long?"

"Lunch time. You know how it is? Not like the stiff's got a train to catch." Halmes winked his one eye. "I don't need to hear you askin' this, Teddy. This isn't your job anymore."

Ted cleared his throat. "You know how it is. Old habits die hard."

Halmes shook his head. "It's not good, mate. Don't do this to yourself." Halmes looked as if he were about to say something else, but instead patted his former partner on the shoulder. "You deserve better. Get out. Set up a little PI biz by yourself. Sure as hell be a lot less stressful, and the pay has to be better." Ted looked away and seemed upset. "I'll probably end up joining you the way things are going," Halmes said and smiled.

Ted crouched and began sifting through the litter behind the wall with a silver pen from his pocket. They both knew it—he'd never make it back to detective—but neither wanted to admit the truth. The Lieutenant wouldn't risk Ted embarrassing him again.

"Don't do that. You're disturbing evidence," Halmes said, and Ted didn't know if he was serious. Halmes took out his notepad.

Ted continued in his search.

"Sorry, mate." Halmes gave Ted's shoulder a firm squeeze. "I can't let you in.

You know how it is.”

Ted found a glossy business card tangled amidst the grass right by the wall and picked it up. It read: *Red Jim's*. It had probably fallen out of the letterboxes above, but seemed out of place, in that it wasn't weathered. He went to pass it up to Halmes, but his friend was walking away inside.

Ted called out but was ignored.  
He slipped the card into his top pocket.



## Chapter 2: "Indiscretion"

Halmes stood outside the apartment in the foyer wearing white cotton shoe coverings and pulled a latex glove onto his hand. A feverish-looking constable handed him a second glove. Bill Scott, his partner, stared down the hallway leading to the crime scene, gloved hands upturned by his sides.

The constable sporadically sniffed, and his eyeballs were veiny-pink. "You'll wish you had no nose once you get inside." He offered a smart-ass smile. "Better you than me, buddy."

Halmes gave him a look. "Fuck off."

The constable smirked. "Messy one, too. That bad, I'm thinking of becoming vegetarian. I don't want to see meat again." The man shuffled on the spot. "Then again, I'll probably have a steak tonight. My wife makes this mushroom and garlic gravy. Can't be beat."

Halmes' eyeball could have been a white pebble in a creek. "Why don't you just shut up before I take up dentistry with my knuckles."

Scott scoffed. "Subtle, Jack."

The forensic pathologist, Mike Irons—or Mikey Nine-irons as his friends called him—walked up the corridor and met the pair at the door.

"Hey, just the man," Halmes said. "How's the game, Mike?"

"Like shit. I'm getting too old."

"Tell me about it."

Mikey had a love for golf that bordered on obsession, and when he wasn't working, he could be found on the fairway. He was dressed in a brilliant-white full body suit, zipped up at the front, with white gloves, shoe coverings, and a pulled-back hood. A bulky camera hung around his neck. He was in his mid-fifties, and his head was round and overly large, making him look like a red-haired pumpkin with bad skin.

"You might want to hang out in the hall a bit," Mikey said. "You know the drill. Get yourself accustomed to the aroma before heading in. Breathe through your mouth." He looked from Scott to Halmes and back again.

But Halmes didn't care, didn't hesitate, and, once his gloves were on, led the way inside.

The apartment was painted lilac, and the floors in the hall were dark polished hardwood. The bedrooms had a creamy, shag carpet. A line of picture frames down the hall contained black-and-white portraits of males in various stages of

undress. The apartment had high ceilings, with green- and blue-painted molding—roses entwined with brambles and leaves.

Halmes' footsteps were overly loud in the narrow passage as he headed past two bedrooms and a bathroom.

A white-suited photographer was busy at work in the third bedroom, snapping shots. Yellow numbered triangles were placed at various positions around the room. Purple velvet curtains were drawn against the day, and the bed and drawers were pine, stained light lavender. The bed was covered with a colorful mink blanket that depicted a tiger hunting in bamboo. A lamp had been affixed to the bed head, and its globe had been smashed. Glass lay on the pillow. A clay incense burner molded like a dragon was placed in the middle of the floor—its trough contained a single line of ash.

A bloated corpse was propped against the side of the bed, naked and cross-legged on a befouled pillow. His palms were upturned on his knees as if he were meditating, but his forearms had been slashed open to the bone, downward from the elbow to the wrist. An open cutthroat razor lay in his lap alongside his inflated penis. Blood had dried across much of the bedroom floor, and the carpet had set like a putrid-mottled plasma jelly. It was hard to tell the victim's age. The top layers of skin had slipped away from the flesh as a layer of almond worm skin, and brown fluid oozed from the corpse's orifices. The corpse had short-cropped sunflower-yellow hair, a golden earring of a crucifix hung from his left ear, and his pubes were an apricot brown. His dead face was contorted in an agonized grimace, closed raisin eyes, mouth slightly agape, face inclined toward the right wrist facing the window. The skin was marbled green, and the pattern of dead, black veins reminded Halmes of a spider web. There were numerous hesitation cuts on the wrists.

"I hate it when they go like that: messy-like. You know me, hands on sorta guy." Nine-irons tugged Halmes' sleeve. "This way, and I hope you haven't eaten lunch."

Halmes headed for the lounge room, and that slice of pizza he'd eaten earlier moved inside his belly. Scott loitered at the bedroom door holding his stomach.

"So what can you tell me?" Halmes asked.

Nine-irons trailed behind, reading from his notepad. "No sign of forced entry. The victims were males, both late twenties. Randy James, who you've just met, and his live-in lover, Austin Wong." He flipped a page.

"Who discovered the bodies?"

“Neighbor. Elderly gentleman. Lives upstairs. Name: Gordon McTavish. Smelled an odor coming through the vents in his kitchen. Thought it might have been a rat that died in the walls. Knocked on the door to investigate and determined the smell was coming from the unit. Called the police.”

“Conscientious neighbor.”

“Or just plain fucking nosey.”

“Murder-suicide?”

“Possibly, but somehow I don’t think so. James was in there when the deed was done—there’s sprayed blood on his chest, most likely Wong’s—but I don’t think he’s the killer.”

“Why not?” Halmes stopped and turned to face the forensic pathologist.

Nine-irons hesitated. “This is one for the books. You have to see it for yourself.”

The corridor turned a corner. As Halmes approached the lounge-room door, the smell hit him in the face like a gust of summer air from the tip, and he was no seagull. His one eye became teary.

He gazed into Bosch’s inferno and felt his gall rise.

He forced it back down.

Swallowed.

Breathed through his mouth.

The room was a pink-painted cube. A naked torso lay amidst a shambles of glass and wood—the remains of a coffee table—on a bloodstained Persian rug. Two forensic officers were dusting the bookcase for fingerprints. A third was sketching the room, and another occupied himself taking photographs. Two more white-suited officers were busy in the kitchen and could be seen just through the door.

A bookcase and stereo cabinet lay against the nearest wall, either side of a light-red, leather lounge. The chair was slightly inclined toward the large-screen television in the opposite corner. Two piles of clothes were neatly piled at the foot of the bookcase beside a stray cushion and a flattened KY tube.

Austin—his remains were everywhere.

The body had been dismembered, and the arms and legs thrown about. A mottled, olive hand with wrist attached had its fingers splayed across the glass of the television, reaching up from the floor. A second arm had been used to smash the stereo and lay as a pulpy mash on a speaker—the limb was bent like wire. A leg, ripped off at the hip, was suspended in the lace curtains, twisted in the

bloody cloth. The other was shoved into the bottom of the bookcase, crammed between a cookbook and a Macquarie English Dictionary. The headless torso lay limbless in the center of the room. Wong had been eviscerated. Offal was roped over the heater by the window and hung in beige ropes from the ceiling fan. Blood had been smeared around the walls and formed a crusty pool on the rug and wooden floor.

"Fuck me with a screwdriver." Halmes gripped his stomach.

Scott came up behind and instantly turned away, clutching his mouth.

"I'm placing the deaths early Wednesday morning," said Nine-irons. "James was last seen early Tuesday night putting out the bins, and the maggots are immature."

Scott heaved.

"I'll have to test the potassium levels in the vitreous humor to be sure."

"Where's his head?" asked Halmes.

"Missing. We're still looking. Killer might have taken it as a trophy."

"I'll have the bins and surrounding properties searched in case it was dumped."

"No need. Roberts is working the perimeter." Nine-irons gave Halmes an amused smile. "You'll get the facts when we've worked the crime scene."

Nine-irons returned to his notes. Halmes guessed it was easier to revisit the facts on paper rather than look upon them firsthand. This was a scene best forgotten, although Halmes suspected he'd revisit this place in nightmares for the rest of his life.

Halmes forced himself to gaze upon this horror, smell the death, taste the congealed stench on his tongue until it clogged his throat and formed a skin in his mouth.

He'd not forget.

That someone could be so savage, so fuck-brutal, defied belief. In all his years of service, he'd come across some pretty disgusting sights: shootings, stranglings, suicides, and even a man who'd been stabbed in the back seventy-three times by his wife. This murder was something else though. Wong's body hinted at an animalistic barbarism that he'd never come across in his thirty-two years on the job. Whoever did this crime was undeniably deranged, and there'd be more killings too.

Halmes was sure of that.

"There are monsters in the world," Scott said and looked about to cry.

Halmes had to agree: Hitler, Idi Amin, and those Auschwitz bastards. The killer was of their ilk, possessing a rare penchant for cruelty, lacking respect for human life. A soulless individual—a true monster.

This couldn't be allowed to happen again. Not while Halmes had a say. Not while he drew breath and a cop's wage. He tasted that clinging stench and determined to become driven, haunted so that he'd not stop until the one responsible was in the grave or behind bars and incarcerated for life. His career as a police officer paled into insignificance at this moment. All his work amounted to nothing if such a travesty could happen in his precinct.

On his watch.

Halmes looked upon Wong's ravaged body.

He'd bring this fucker down—permanently if necessary.

"God, have mercy," Scott turned away again.

Halmes stared without expression.

Nine-irons flicked through his notes. "Broken wineglasses—three—were found," he nodded to the lounge where the stem of a wine goblet could be seen beneath the curved armrest. "In the kitchen sink are the dishes from three meals."

"The killer was known to the victims," said Halmes matter-of-factly.

"Possibly."

"Murder weapon?" Scott asked.

"None." Nine-irons put his hands on his hips, stepped into the lounge, and regarded the room. "From what we can determine," his head swayed from side to side, "the killer did this artistry with his bare hands."

If Halmes wasn't mistaken, he detected a hint of admiration in Nine-irons' voice.

Sick fuck.

Mike Irons continued with his analysis, but Halmes didn't want to hear anymore. He'd read about it later and revisit the crime scene himself.

Right now, he needed to get some air.

"Mike." An officer with a shaved head and a sickle-shaped nose poked his head out the kitchen door. He supported himself by clutching the doorframe with a latex hand. "We've found Wong's head."

"Where?" Nine-irons asked.

The officer nodded to inside the kitchen, a place beyond the door. "In the oven. . . ."

“And?”

The man’s expression became glassy. “Someone’s taken his eyes.”

“Why doesn’t anyone like me?” Al was drunk and slouched in a bean chair before the blind eye of the television. He sipped a stubby—the squat bottle of beer was just visible in his wide hand. His hair was spiked wet from the shower, and his light blue bathrobe hung loose, revealing the dark matted hair of his chest and a single, peach nipple. An embroidered scarlet rose lay on his heart.

The room was scantily furnished and lit by a solitary candle on the rosewood coffee table against the wall. The flame flickered beside a Chinese vase decorated with a dragon rising from a stormy sea. Sandalwood incense burned on a plate nearby, its gray smoke twisted in the shadows like a squid escaping a dream. There was a bookshelf heavy with technical manuals—Pascal, C++, Assembler, Cobol—and a computer desk in the corner beside the telephone. Bob Marley played in the bedroom.

Pete wanted to tell Al to wake up to reality: he was a successful programmer earning more money than he could sensibly spend; he was young with his life ahead of him. Instead, he offered a consoling smile. “You’re just a little hard to get close to is all. Most people don’t make the effort.”

Pete sat on the carpet across the room in a pair of borrowed boxer shorts. The oversize silk pants hung about his hips with all the modesty of a loincloth. An open pizza box with cheese growths on the cardboard lay at his feet beside an open bottle of imported cherry vodka and a metal bucket half-full of ice slush. “I don’t know. It’s just you’re *different*, but that’s a good thing.” Pete sipped his vodka. “Man, this is strong.” He sucked at his lips. “It’s pickling my tongue.”

Al stared at the shadows on the wall.

“What people don’t understand, they stay away from.” Pete grimaced at his own platitude.

Al grunted and returned to his beer. Five empty stubbies were at his feet. He sipped his drink with puckered lips and idly scratched his head.

Pete wondered where Robbie was now: probably dancing at a club, or off with some exotic stranger. Pete would have much preferred to spend Saturday night partying, but Al needed him. He felt a tremor of emotion beneath Al’s psychological shell. Pete could feel Al’s yearning, almost touch the true face of the man. It had only taken half a case of beer to get Al to open up; and now that he had, Pete intended to exorcise the ghoul inside.

Al's eyes were stagnant. "Do you think I'm attractive?"

Pete sipped his drink, wondering where this vein of conversation was leading to, cautious and in some ways afraid of the unspoken possibilities of the moment.

Al continued to watch. Waiting for a reaction? Expecting reproof.

Pete shook his head. "You're deranged."

"I mean," Al paused as if cautious, "if I was gay, would you fancy me?"

Pete pressed his hand against his forehead as if his brain might suddenly explode. "It's not like that. You're a friend." His voice became little more than a whisper. "I just don't think of you that way."

"Rejected." Al sculled his beer. He tossed the bottle aside onto the floor, where it bounced and rolled. "Another one for me, and then a dozen more. I'm gunna drink till I puke, mate." He struggled upright, and his gown fell open—all he wore was underpants beneath. "Don't drink all that vodka." Al meandered towards the kitchen at the back of the house. "That shit's expensive."

Pete felt as though he'd somehow betrayed his friend. On one hand, he felt responsible for Al. They'd grown up together, and sure, they'd went separate ways during the high school years—Al had gone to live in the mountains. Life was funny, though, and they'd been reunited at university and had been close ever since. There'd always been some attraction—no friendship stands the test of time without an underlying bond of love—but this was dangerous ground, and Pete knew it. An expedition onto a porcelain planet that could easily shatter underfoot and send them both plummeting to extinction.

But eighteen years of friendship had to count for something, right?

"The thing is," Pete watched Al as he walked away, "you're not gay, never gunna be gay. This is a conversation you don't want to have. Trust me. I've been here before. Your inquisitive nature could be the end of us."

Al stopped in the doorway with his gown dangling open. "Maybe I *am* gay, and thanks for the faith, bud. It's nice to see you care. Know who your friends are, right?" He paused and watched the effect of his words. "Maybe I am a fag and just don't know it?" Then he turned, reeled open the fridge, snatching out a stubby, and throttled the cap from its neck. "Won't know unless I try." He swayed on his feet smiling oddly. "Who said that?"

Pete commenced a speech on the biological reasons for his own homosexuality, how he and Al had a history together and they didn't want to risk that, how Al was his oldest and dearest friend and he could never risk losing him.

Al just drank.

"I love you, man. I *feel* that," Al said and punched his breast as he walked back through the door. "You know, I just wonder what sex is like sometimes." He paused, swaying slightly. "With someone else. I just can't understand why no one likes me. Why no one gets to know *me*, loves me like you. Finds the person behind the work and crap." He jabbed at his chest repeatedly with a single finger, then walked toward his seat.

Pete met him halfway across the floor.

"I do love you," Pete said in an urgent whisper, searching Al's eyes. He placed a tremulous hand on Al's bosom. "I love you more than life itself." He sighed, fingers rising to the side of Al's neck, gently stroking skin. "I don't want to get hurt."

"I don't want you hurt." Al seemed about to cry, and his gaze dropped to the floor. "I don't want to be alone anymore."

Pete craned upward and kissed him gently, a soft peck, merging closer, stubble on stubble, lips lingering to commence a rough, hard passionate kiss, tongue probing, slithering between Al's lips.

And Al kissed him back. Gingerly at first, a frightened, uncertain sort of response, but when he tasted the cherry vodka on Pete's tongue he seemed to gain confidence. He took Pete in an embrace and kissed him fully. The two men hugged and crushed their bodies against each other, meeting like two waves in an explosion of spume. Pete pulled open Al's bathrobe, tossed it back across the shoulder until it fell to the floor, slithering away into a pile of crushed blue. Al stood there in his underpants, penis half-erect. He dropped his stubby; it bounced and spun on the carpet, spurting beer.

Al's right hand danced aimlessly over Pete's chest, slowly gaining precision and surety; his other arm locked around his friend's neck, holding lips captive against his own. His jaw chewed vigorously at Pete's mouth and consumed his lips and tongue. Wavering fingers explored the soft, golden down on Pete's chest . . . located and stroked the left nipple. Brushing back Pete's blonde hair, he ran his fingertips across his friend's scalp, traced the firm mound of the pectoral muscles, brushed over the slight bumps of the ribs. He went lower still, circled the belly button, danced around the edge of the hole, wormed beneath the sagging waistband of Pete's boxer shorts.

His fingers plunged lower still.

Pete turned his face slightly aside and licked Al's earlobe. "Don't," he gasped,

the word a warning. "Don't. You'll hate me in the morning."

Al reclaimed his hand and gripped Pete's wrist. He pulled Pete's fingertips across his belly and forced them to his crotch. "Do me," he said removing his lips. "I want to try."

Pete fell to his knees. His erection pushed open a button in his boxers revealing the luminous glow of his slender penis.

Al began to rip at the side of his underpants, trying to tear them free, but the cloth gathered into a rope of material that refused to yield. With a cry of exasperation, Al pulled the pants down, away, flipped them off his foot. Azure blue flew across the room and landed on Pete's bottle, knocking it over. Cherry vodka sloshed onto the floor.

Pete's tongue licked and flickered along Al's member. His hand took the base of the uncircumcised shaft and gently squeezed; the head of the penis appeared through skin like the fleshy bulb of a tulip. Pete nibbled the foreskin, licking around the head, and then Al's hands pushed his head firmly down, onto the flesh pole, shoving it fully into his mouth. The man tasted salty, slightly bitter as Pete's tongue probed beneath the foreskin. Al took him by the hair and began pushing his head up and down, up and down on the shaft, hips rising to meet him, up, down, lunging, scraping over his teeth, up, down, thrusting to the back of his throat. Pete went down so deep he felt he'd gag, but welcomed the experience nonetheless. His heart pounded, as though this was *his* first time, and in a way it was. A dire anticipation filled his being, a moment of discovery with Al his friend, when the companion of his life finally took him as a lover.

*But, what will the morning bring?* a stray thought enquired.

Pete focused on the movement, the warmth in his mouth, the salty taste of the penis' opening eye sliding up and down, up, up into the cavern with his tongue.

Al groaned, a soft, almost painful sob, and ejaculated into Pete's mouth, filling the orifice with warm, glutinous brine.

Pete swallowed it down—he had no choice—it was that or choke. He could feel his own penis twitching, filling, pining to be touched.

*But, what of the morning? What will come?*

Al pushed Pete aside. His penis pumped semen down his legs, clogging the hairs with white glue.

Pete looked upwards and wiped his lips.

Al closed his eyes and turned away.



### Chapter 3: “Amber”

Jimmy Pegler sat in the third row in the Teenie Titties club and sipped a middy of Four X beer. Foam-rimmed empties were on the floor between his polished shoes, and his gray-streaked, copper hair was lacquered down so that it looked somewhat like wood grain. The jacket of his pinstriped suit was draped over the seat in which he sat, and there was a pen in his pocket and a small ink spot on his white cotton shirt. Maybe forty-five, he sat with half a cigarette balanced precariously on his bottom lip as he clapped to the beat of the music pounding from the speakers. His face held a rigid smile as he watched the young stripper contorting on the stage.

The girl’s skin was the color of honey, and her face was oval, framed by shoulder-length black hair. She was topless and wore a G-string, and her tiny breasts had pert, chocolate nipples. She bent over backward and pulled aside the fabric of her crimson, satin panties momentarily exposing her sex. Flinging back her hands, she spun and dropped into the splits on the floor.

“Whoa, baby!” Jimmy yelled. “That’s gotta hurt!”

The girl crawled across the stage and spun around the base of the pole. She flashed Jimmy a smile.

The girl’s moves were clumsy and unpracticed—she moved too fast—but her body was something else. God, she had to have been barely eighteen, nineteen tops. Jimmy wondered if she was in fact a *virgin* to the stage as the announcer had said? Was Jimmy enjoying her first and possibly last performance? She didn’t look too amused by the leering grins of the patrons. Some of the new dancers did one show and never returned. Those were the performances Jimmy relished. The girls came and went, but Jimmy was always there—waiting. Five dollars entry for all the ass he could stand—shit, a man would have to be a fool to stay alone at home. Jimmy sat on the edge of the stage most nights until midnight and had done so for the past five-odd years, ever since. . . .

Three Japanese businessmen were chuckling amongst themselves in the back row. Sitting around and before them were four of the girls who worked the customers. That blond bitch Maggie Jane, fat Katrina, an unknown brunette wearing too much makeup, and Pinkie with her vermilion hair, protruding tits, and mauve, silk nightie. All four were trying to coax the Japs upstairs. Jimmy knew that if the dumb fucks succumbed to the women’s wiles they’d return with their wallets significantly lighter.

A scattering of men sat around the stage, and a few were gathered before the bar. Men, mostly alone, some in groups of two or three, came and went throughout the evening, somewhat like aged actors revisiting Shakespeare's theatre, remembering the glory days of their lives. Every two hours or so, a pair of cops would drop in, scab a drink, eyeball the girls, and leave.

Jimmy ignored the crowd and the distractions of the prostitutes. The girls didn't bother Jimmy except on the slowest of nights. Sure, he'd get the occasional passing invite, but Jimmy had never been upstairs to the brothel. No way. Jimmy liked to watch, not touch. Remember each girl, go home, feed the cat, and jerk off. God knew what you could catch nowadays.

He liked redheads the best.

The stripper eased forward on her knees and slowly slid her G-string down until they gathered around her knees. She tugged them away until they hung like a noose around her ankles.

Jimmy's penis tingled in his pants, but he resisted the temptation to grow hard.

Watch. Wait.

God, she had an ass—peach-shaped, shining like a black pearl in the erratic lights of the stage.

"Enjoying the show?" a soft voice whispered. A strong musk smell came to Jimmy's nose.

"Sorry, I'm not inter. . . ."

Jimmy's voice died as he turned. The woman by his side was the spitting image of Cheryl, his dead wife. They'd been married twelve years before Cheryl had lost control of the Commodore and skidded into a pine tree in a storm on the way home from work. It took them four hours to cut her free. During that time, she'd died.

Cheryl gave Jimmy a knowing smile. Pale blue eyes. Fire-orange, curly hair tumbled to her shoulders, and there was that smattering of freckles on her nose. A tiny bow of a mouth. Baby-cherub lips.

Her eyes began to unpeel Jimmy's soul.

"Cheryl?" Jimmy didn't know what else to say. "You're Cheryl."

"I'm new," the woman said as if she weren't quite listening to what Jimmy was saying. "Mind if I take a seat?" She sat in the chair next to Jimmy. The metal legs scraped the floor.

Jimmy found he was staring and apologized. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"No," she replied almost too quickly. "But I'd like to know one thing." She leant forward, and her breath was hot on his cheek. "Come upstairs with me, Jimmy." She licked his earlobe and nipped the flesh.

Jimmy pulled back. "No." He wondered if Cheryl had had a sister? It *was* possible. Cheryl had been an orphan and never knew her biological family. Jimmy had heard once that every person has a double in the world—maybe this was Cheryl's? Or perhaps the paramedics had lied? Maybe the body in the car hadn't been Cheryl at all? Jimmy didn't know . . . right now, he didn't care.

"I'll come," he said.

This was Cheryl returned to give him a second chance.

"No. Can't be." Jimmy slid away one seat. "I . . . ah, changed my mind." He looked offended at the woman by his side . . . this, this *Cheryl*. He examined the curves of her face, her body. Listened to the inflections of her voice as she continued trying to tempt him away. She wore a fake fur coat—tacky as hell. Jimmy would never—sure as God loved Moses—allow his wife to work in a strip joint. She'd *never* wear a lace, black slip. It barely hid her flesh, her breasts . . . and God, he missed sucking those.

He could see a pink nipple where the strap had fallen away.

"Can't be," Jimmy said. "I buried you. Twenty-nine . . . shit, you were too young, baby."

The woman absentmindedly readjusted her breasts. "We could have some fun, ya know? How 'bout it? Need a girlfriend?" Her breath smelled sour like milk gone off.

Jimmy returned his eyes to the stage and caught a flash of leg as the stripper disappeared behind the curtain. The husky voice of the announcer encouraged applause.

"I'm sorry, I don't have cash," Jimmy said still looking away.

"That's a lie." Cheryl slid closer. Jimmy could feel the heat of her body against his side. Her perfume had a spicy tang, musk covering something else—something rank almost, lingering, beneath the overpowering odor of the perfume.

"I don't believe you," Cheryl said, and her hand squeezed Jimmy's leg just above the knee.

Jimmy grabbed her wrist. "What's your real name?"

Shadows filled the eye sockets of the woman.

"Cherry," she said slowly.

"Well, *Cherry*, I don't have cash, and if you don't mind, I'd prefer to watch the show." Jimmy said this all too loud, and a few patrons turned at his voice.

Cherry eased closer until her mouth was at his ear. "I have a secret," and her breath was steamy on his neck. "That's not *really* my name," she paused, allowing the significance of what she'd said to sink in.

Jimmy pulled back, knowing this was Cheryl, not some double or twin, but *Cheryl*, his dead wife, killed in a car crash, somehow returned from the grave. He dropped his cigarette and glass.

"Put your hands together gentlemen for the Lady of Love. Damsel of Desire. . . . Angelica!"

A few customers clapped at the announcement. Two of the Japanese tourists stood up to do so. The third was being led toward the upstairs stairwell, supported between the arms of Pinkie and the unknown prostitute.

"I'm sorry," Jimmy said. "I didn't mean to be rude . . . but what's your name, your real name I mean? I promise, I won't bite."

"You know," Cherry said, smiling, taking Jimmy's arm in her own. "How 'bout you come with me, and if you don't like what I got, you don't have to pay." She giggled—a high-pitched sound. "But not here. We have someplace else to go."

Jimmy eased himself off his chair. His mouth was dry. He felt somewhat sick in his stomach, as if the beer he'd drunk was really spinach soaked in olive oil.

Cheryl had pinpricks of light for eyes.

Maggie Jane elbowed Katrina in the forearm and pointed across the room. "I never thought I'd see the likes of *him* leaving with one of us."

Jimmy Pegler stumbled arm in arm with the hunched figure of a woman. The pair walked up the aisle toward the exit.

"Who's she, then?" Katrina didn't quite recognize the woman Jimmy was with. She was new, definitely a stranger, yet somehow, inexplicably familiar. She was old though, far too old to be a worker.

But then, if she wasn't a prostitute, who was she?

"Dunno. Look at what he fancies." Maggie Jane shook her head from side to side. "Old tart's got to be sixty, if she's a day."

"All sorts, luv, all sorts." Katrina pinched her nipples to bring them erect then smiled at her Japanese companion. "No wonder we never flogged that horse. Never stood a chance." She glanced at Maggie, and the pair began to snicker.

"We're just not that ripe."

Jimmy passed by at the end of the aisle.

"Nice night, Jimmy love," Maggie Jane called after him. "Upstairs for a bit?"

Jimmy didn't answer and didn't look Maggie's way, which was unusual, as he was known for his smart mouth.

"Well, who's a randy bugger then?"

More laughter.

Jimmy stared ahead. His wizened companion had a shawl of white hair that flowed across the twisted hump on her back. She wore a fur coat and a black slip, and the tops of her shriveled breasts could be seen over the sagging lace.

The crone gave Maggie a toothless smile. She pulled Jimmy toward the door.

Al had defiled himself with a man.

He busied himself at work all week to distract himself from the memory of his drunken indiscretion. He worked sixteen hours on three consecutive days and programmed himself into an exhausted stupor, but the memory of what Pete had done just wouldn't fade.

*You were sucked off by a guy!*

The memory persisted even now.

*Lost your virginity to a bloke.*

Al shuffled his feet as he waited for Amber outside the Majestic Hotel in the city. He had the Post-It note with Amber's phone number crushed up inside his hand.

Crowds scurried by like Muppets in business suits and dresses. Taxis honked, the horns echoed along the glass and steel gorge that was George Street. A vagrant with a shopping trolley full of bags and old wine bottles scavenged cigarette butts from the curb. All the while, the wind scattered garbage from the quay.

Al hadn't seen Pete since Sunday morning, about nine-thirty.

*Mate. You're not gay, so why'd you do it?*

Al didn't know. He blamed the beer and sun.

Pete had spent a couple of hours of broken sleep, Saturday night, freezing on the lounge, without so much as a blanket. They'd shared a silent breakfast. Al had faked a hangover as an excuse to avoid conversation and had spurned Pete's morning kiss. Pete had eaten nothing, hung around the fridge moody, drank coffee, and left by taxi before ten.

Al had been glad to see Pete go. He'd found the Post-It note with Amber's number stuck to the freezer door soon after.

Saturday night was an embarrassing interlude at best. The how and why of Al's drunken indiscretion were questions for another day, a better day, and standing outside the Majestic right now, that day was yet to come.

If it never came, it would be six hours too soon.

Anger had found Al in the BMW, Monday morning, as he buckled up his seat belt. A furious beast, it demanded Al punish Pete for seducing him — punch him up and break his nose, shatter the teeth of that clever smile.

Al knew he'd have to avoid Pete then. They'd been friends for too many years, and it was time they went their separate ways. Pete was gay, and Al wasn't—he knew *that* with certainty. Al felt defiled, violated, even though he knew logically it was partly his fault. Pete was gay, and fags shag anything, including him. Al had been drunk, stupid, vulnerable, and Pete had been a predator responding to his nature.

Al should have known better.

"I'm not gay," Al said through clenched teeth. His shoulders were hunched against the wind. He held a bunch of blood-red roses in one hand, wrapped in pink-spotted paper.

"I'll never be a victim again."

Pete could go his own way. To see that face, those eyes, was to *remember*, and Al didn't want to remember. It was tragic to lose the friendship, but things could only get worse. Pete would probably want more, and if he asked, Al would have to pound him into the ground.

Amber appeared out of the hotel. Her long, black hair was snagged by a gust of air, and her tresses lashed out like the inky arms of a deep-sea squid. Her smile was all teeth, her eyes were a dazzling purple, rare amethysts set against her jet-black face. She was taller than Al, slightly, six-three, six-four, and her legs went on forever, burnt umber brown that held a waxy sheen. Her dress was cerulean, silk heavy with diamantés, tight, adhering to her hips and thighs. She wore silver stilettos and carried a matching Glomesh handbag. She saw Al wave at her, waved back uncertainly, and walked straight at him.

"Hello there. Al? Pete Tate's friend? Call me Amber." She shook Al's hand.

Al tried to smile but couldn't. He just stood there, battered by the wind, staring into Amber's eyes, and felt foolish as he couldn't remember any words. He was a somber mimic who had failed to amuse a crowd. He was embarrassing

himself. He handed over the roses.

Amber said something Al didn't quite catch. She brushed aside her fringe with the back of her hand.

"You could be a model," Al said, "you're more than beautiful." Amber looked at him oddly and thanked him.

Being with such a woman, Al felt better about himself. And what places had Amber seen? What cities had she explored? She was wonderful and unashamedly met his stare. Those eyes allowed Al to forget Pete, if only for a moment. This wonderful, exotic *woman* was going on a date with *him*, and here Al was, twenty-nine, overweight, a male virgin who had just been molested by a gay.

Al adjusted his yellow-speckled tie and held out his arm. "Shall we go?"

"One moment. Flowers." Amber hurried back toward the hotel.

Al panicked to see Amber's back, and then he caught a bum watching him. A dirty individual with stained teeth dressed in a vomitus business suit. One eye was white and blind, and the end of one shoe was open and exposed his toes. A matted beard grew on his jowls, and he held out his hand as he staggered toward Al.

Al held the man's fractured look. His fists bunched by his sides.

The old man muttered something, then swore, and veered away to hurry down the street. He glanced back occasionally over his shoulder and eventually disappeared into the crowd.

He seemed familiar, Al thought, remembering his father, but the notion was ludicrous. His Dad was in Tibet and was definitely not a bum. The wind and exhaustion had gone to his head. He was too stressed. He needed a drink.

Tonight, his luck would change.

Rodger Linstrum hurried toward Central Station, shouldering his way through the bustling crowds. If he didn't rush, he'd miss the 7:03 P.M. express, and he didn't fancy waiting an hour for the next mountains train. He detoured down an alley: green garbage bins overflowing with refuse were clustered against the dirty brickwork. Old graffiti—a tag in silver and black. The tar of the road had an ashen skin of filth speckled with sodden paper.

Rodger stumbled and almost dropped his briefcase. The sound of the crowd and traffic diminished.

The wind hit him, full in the face, blowing grit into his eyes, sharp particles

like powdered glass scratched beneath his eyelids.

“Shit.” Rodger dropped his briefcase. He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyelids and felt tears against his skin. His eyes hurt badly.

He was going to miss that train.

It was then that he heard it, a faint cry like the mewling of a cat. He was spitting on his fingers at the time, rubbing saliva into his eyes and blinking rapidly through a blur of tears. His eyelids involuntarily closed every time he opened them, but he blinked on regardless and grimaced from the discomfort.

The sound again, louder this time.

Rodger could make out a doorway in the brick wall from which the noise had seemed to come. A red door, open amidst a collage of old concert posters and weight-loss advertisements. A passage turned away into shadow, and sound came again—an animal yowling—a cat or a kitten suffering.

Rodger couldn’t turn his back on an animal in distress. His wife, Judy, would understand his being late given the circumstances. They shared the same compassion when it came to the lesser species and had been volunteers of WIRES for three and a half years, helping the recovery of hurt fauna found on highways and roads: possums, cockatoos, and, once, a tiny sugar glider. Judy had fed it with an eyedropper. It had taken to tasting the sweat on Rodger’s fingers with small licks.

The cries of the animal drew Rodger closer to the door. He’d have to run to catch the train now and, with his eyes as they were, just couldn’t do it. He had time to investigate.

“Hello?” Blinking, Rodger stepped inside the door and was hit with a sharp, acrid stench—a sort of a musky stink with a bite. “Nasty.”

He pinched his nose and, with one eye shut, turned into the passage.

The cat growled, quite loudly this time, and Rodger could see a second door, forty-odd feet down a passage of moldy, green carpet. There were holes in the plaster wall. A cracked sign caught his eye. It read, “Trespassers will be prosecuted,” except someone had crossed out *prosecuted* and scrawled over it *killed*.

Outside, the wind picked up, raising a cloud of garbage dust that scoured the building and the door. The swirling air almost dared to come inside, but didn’t. Instead it rushed away, slamming the red door shut as it passed.

“Oh, gripes.” Rodger tried the door. It had locked fast. He felt claustrophobic confined within the stench of this residence, which was odd, as he’d never

experienced the feeling before. What sort of person lived in such a hovel anyway? Someone with a sinus problem?

A noise like shaking maracas came from that distant room—an ophidian sound like the tails of a dozen diamondback rattlers. Rodger heard something shuffle on the carpet. He wrestled with the lock with one eye open, but the deadlock held fast. There came the sound of a chair being knocked over, then the cat again with its tortured yowl.

“Excuse me? I’m locked in. I really need to catch a train.” Rodger blinked and began walking slowly down the passage.

Labored breathing. A Mack truck shadow of a man appeared in the room—overly large with long, matted hair and a hunched and twisted stance. The figure turned Rodger’s way. He wore a long, brown coat that hung to the floor, and a crushed Stetson was balanced crookedly on his head.

He came forward.

One chitinous hand reached up and grasped the top of the doorframe. With shoulders like construction beams, his fingers must have had something on them as they were tapered like claws. In the other hand, the stranger throttled a cat that it lifted to its mouth. His face was lost in the shadow of his hat.

Rodger let out an involuntary gurgle.

The cowboy dropped the cat. It hissed and bolted away into the room.

“I have a train to catch.” It was all Rodger could think to say. He dropped his briefcase and backed away, pressing his back against the broken plaster wall. He turned, and ran, and struggled with the door handle with both hands. The thing rushed forward—too fast—down the corridor, wreathed in shadow, rattling as it came.

Rodger screamed.

The wind took away his cries.



## Chapter 4: “Mysteries”

They shared a gin and tonic at Ginger’s, a sea shanty bar. A few drinks later, and Al knew he liked Amber. He felt secure in her presence—he couldn’t explain it. He was able to relax, and talk as if they were old friends, and began revealing private details of his life. Amber listened and seemed amused.

The skeptic in Al attributed his feelings to the gin. Was he overcompensating because of Pete? No, there was an unmistakable chemistry; Amber was irresistible, beyond enchanting. She possessed a dark, enigmatic quality that awoke Al’s passion; something deadly and seductive like a voodoo spell.

The pair walked around Circular Quay hand in hand. They ended up catching the Monorail to Darling Harbor, where they browsed souvenir shops. As the sun began to set, Amber led him to a floating restaurant on the pier, a converted ferry with murky windows. The waiters wore sailor suits and blue-ribboned hats.

“I’ve made a booking.” Amber led the way down the gangplank, fumbling in her purse. She handed her AMEX to the waiter at a small pulpit just inside the door. A red rose stood on the desktop in a slender metal urn beside a brass bell. A glass dish contained a scattering of coins.

They took a table near the windows, one that afforded a good view of outside.

They spent the evening cruising Sydney Harbor and dined on oysters, prawns and lobster Mornay. They sipped white wine from the Hunter Valley and listened to jazz from the band. Outside, the waves shimmered in the moonlight, slivers of silver spawning in the void. A gale picked up and rocked the boat as it passed before a fairyland of city lights and neon advertisements.

Amber’s eyes were a violet like lotus flowers mingled with the night. Her skin was the color of cinnamon passed through the fire and smelt of flowers and exotic spice.

The pair danced in each other’s arms on the top deck beneath a cloudy moon with music drifting up from inside. The other passengers had retreated inside out of the wind and cold. Amber was warm against Al’s chest; her hips writhed as they danced to an old Glenn Miller tune.

“I don’t usually like this music,” Al said, enjoying the warmth of Amber’s breath beneath his nose. “But, after tonight, I’ll never listen to anything else again.”

Amber smiled. “Who’d have taken you for a cheese?”

Al gave an embarrassed laugh.

Amber leant her head against his cheek. They danced in silence. Somewhere in the darkness, a gull squawked.

"I feel good," Al whispered, almost to himself. "The bad has gone away."

The image of Pete's upturned face stayed behind his eyes.

The song finished, and they went inside for Turkish coffee, black and thick like crude oil. Amber told Al about her life.

She'd been born in the Congo, the only child in a wealthy family. Her father exported dresses to America, where they were sold in exclusive boutiques. Her parents had taken Amber with them on their travels from a very young age.

Amber spoke of Europe and her travels there: Rome, Berlin, Stockholm, how she'd crossed the old USSR by train, and backpacked around China with three friends, Tommy, Jill and Orlando. She'd hiked through the Amazon jungles and climbed the Andes.

"You've been everywhere," said Al. "All I've been to is Cairns, and that was hot. Nice beaches, but beaches aren't my thing. I burn."

Amber held up her glass as if in a toast. "One life—use it and die."

"Tell me more." Al leant across the table with his hands held together before him.

"Think about it." Amber wobbled the wineglass, holding the stem between two fingers, and took a sip. "I've been skydiving in Switzerland. Scuba diving off Easter Island. Hiking in Nepal."

"Anywhere you haven't been?"

Amber paused. "Here—this boat, and now I've been to that." She smiled. "Bleed life dry, Al. Bleed it to a husk."

"Really?"

"No." They both laughed.

Al ordered dessert.

Over plum pudding and custard, Amber spoke of her interest in archaeology, and the conversation skipped from the occult to philosophy to religion.

"You must be sick of me talking," said Amber. "Tell me about yourself."

"No." Al burped into his napkin. "That's the last thing I want to do—babble on about my boring life." Al lifted a shot glass of dessert wine to his lips and sipped the oversweet drink. He imagined it was ambrosia, and he was dining with a goddess. "Please go on."

"Let me share something." Amber twirled her forefinger through the side of her hair. "The Mayan ruins in the Yucatan is a special place."

"Yeah? Sounds yucky." Al enunciated the last word slowly and instantly berated himself for the stupid attempt at a joke. He compensated by filling his mouth with wine, emptying the glass with a slurp.

The liquid was a trickle of lava running down his throat.

"Tulum is enchanting," Amber said, and her eyes became empty with darkness. "I sat on the top of the sun temple and looked out upon a sea of living turquoise. The sun was suspended in the sky. The air was charged, static, electric as if the moment had been suspended in time. I could have been sitting there three thousand years ago, and I wouldn't have known."

Al grunted. "The farthest I've gone is Alice Springs. Party down with the blowflies. Woo hoo."

Amber leant across the table as if she were about to share a confidence. "I had opportunity to visit some of the more remote ruins, some of the tombs. Their religion was brutal, almost barbaric; nothing worthwhile comes without pain. A journey to divinity is not made without cost," her voice became a breath. "For true revelation, you must be prepared to go beyond flesh."

Al offered a sly smile. "Flesh? How so?"

"Their people were into ritual bloodletting. A priest might slash his penis or cut a hole in his tongue."

"God, no."

"Run a barbed rope through the wound to appease the gods. The bloodletting *had* to be painful. You couldn't just slash your arm. The vision serpent could only be invoked with a sacrifice of extreme pain, utmost agony. They would collect the blood in a container to divine the future."

Al felt weak.

"Tikal changed my life more than I shall ever know." Amber looked out across the bay with a distant look. The boat cruised towards the Harbor Bridge, swaying on its way.

"Tikal?" Al stared at Amber's lips. He wanted to kiss them. Taste that apricot lipstick. Lick it from her skin.

"Tikal. One of the major ruins from the height of the Mayan civilization. The mystery remains unanswered as to why the Mayans abandoned their cities to the jungle. Tikal, Palenque, Uxmal, Cob, Copan, Edzn, all deserted. Standing in the ruins of Tikal though, alone at midnight, looking at the stars." She paused and watched Al. "So many stars." She swallowed and seemed upset. "There was a presence in the jungle, an energy. The jungle at night is a sentient thing. When I

experienced *that*, I understood *why*."

"Right." Al's mind was a sailboard skimming across the crest of alcoholic waves at that point. He was a carefree surfer with his cares blown away by the sea breeze, his mind numb with adrenaline from his daring journey, wondering when he'd crash into the water, be pounded by the surf, and washed onto barnacle rocks. His eyes followed the smooth surface of Amber's nose, the rise of her cheekbones, and he was drawn to her eyes. He thought he glimpsed a moment of fear then—or was it passion? Was a tear crystallizing in the corner of Amber's eye? But then again it may have only been a lingering droplet of sea spray or a devious trick of the moon.

Amber wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. "They were heavily into visions. Dark gods." She paused and smiled. "I'm boring you. Silly me. You'll never want to visit Tikal now. Don't listen. It's just the wine speaking." She leant over and kissed Al on the forehead.

"You too, huh? It is nice wine." But Al was interested now and wanted to press the conversation. "They used drugs? I never tried drugs myself. Never smoked and never tried marijuana. I watched a movie—*Altered States*. William Hurt drunk from a shaman's brew to receive a vision: mushrooms, lizards, some shit. I always wanted to do that. Glimpse God's undergarments. See heaven."

Amber's face tilted slightly to the side. "You don't seem the type, or are you just a naughty boy?"

Al raised one hand. "Naughty boy. Guilty." He felt foolish. "I'm game to try anything," he lifted a finger, "at least once."

He thought of Pete and bit his tongue.

"You want to know more?"

Al shrugged. "Yes, but give me more wine."

"You shouldn't. Coffee for me, black, no sugar."

"Not me." Al gestured to a dark-haired waiter with a worm moustache. "I'll get a taxi and leave the car in town."

Amber fell silent as the waiter brought a Riesling and refilled Al's glass. She ordered coffee and began to speak as the waiter walked away. "The Mayans would deliberately get themselves bitten by snakes or give themselves hallucinogenic enemas to learn the wisdom of the gods." She watched Al with a fixed intensity, and Al was reminded of the gaze of a kookaburra he'd once seen in the bush, watching this green tree snake in the grass, waiting for dinner to stray from cover. He felt as if Amber had expected him to respond, but he didn't

know what to say. All he could do was listen. A more interesting date would surely offer some anecdote or pearl of wisdom to complement Amber's conversation, but all he could do was sit, and drink, and be ashamed of his silence.

One thought dominated Al's mind: he wanted Amber in bed. Another part of him knew he didn't stand a chance. It was all a fantasy, a bubble that would burst when they found land.

Amber's eyes were circles of ancient stone. "Would you go that far?" she asked, repeating a question that Al had missed. "Would you do that to find a god?"

Al stared into his drink. "Not me. Enemas are Pete's thing." The comment fell flat. "You know Pete? The guy who set us up." Amber nodded slowly. Uncomfortable, Al sifted through his mind for something witty to say to salvage the moment, but found himself thinking of work. He turned away to the window. "Opera House over there. Looks pretty, doesn't it?"

Amber followed his gaze across the harbor. Multi-colored lights glowed across the candy-cane surface of the Opera House, making it resemble a fairy castle constructed from seashells.

"Maybe we should get a picture with it in the background? I'm sure there's a photographer about." Al looked around the room and stood up from his chair.

"There are many mysteries in this world." Amber continued, staring at the table, her voice solemn. "The wonders of modern society pale in comparison."

Al smiled frivolously. "Still—looks nice."

The band finished playing, and a balding musician announced they would be having a fifteen-minute recess. Al thought the speaker badly needed a break. His brow was feverish with sweat.

Amber sipped her wine. "I'd love to see the Blue Mountains before I leave Sydney. Jenolan. I believe the caves are quite remarkable."

Al eased himself back into his seat, glad for a change of topic—he could at least palm himself off as an expert on Aussie tourist crap. "The Australian bush is hardly what I'd call beautiful, although it does possess a certain rugged charm. Nan's old house is past Bodie—Misty Heights. I use it as a holiday house now, although I spent most of my childhood there." He eased forward and began scratching at his thumbnail with the opposing thumb. "This is the right time of the year to go. I love it up there in the winter, ya know? The wind rushing through the trees at night sounds like the surf. It gets a bit chilly, but it's rarely

cold enough for snow. Old Man Winter teases but never actually comes.”

“Delightful.”

“Wanna go?” Al was somehow surprised by his own question. He emptied his glass, and refilled it with wine, topped up Amber’s glass even though he knew she didn’t want more. Water dripped from the bottle and formed dark splatters on the tablecloth.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” Amber seemed amused.

Al didn’t reply at first. His head was distinctly dizzy, and he delighted in the warm flush pulsating through his skin. “I’ll call in sick,” he said quickly. “I have holidays owed. I’ve never taken holidays, would you believe? Work, work, that’s me. Personnel were only bitching last week that if I didn’t take holidays soon, I’d lose ‘em.” Al was talking too fast and knew it, so he shut up and reached for Amber’s hands and captured them in his own. He looked uncertainly into her eyes and held her look.

He regretted all the stupid things he’d said this evening, regretted his ignorance, knew he was out of his depth, but like a man drowning at sea, he’d grab hold of anything if he thought there was a chance it could save his sinking ass. He didn’t want to lose Amber, didn’t want this moment to pass; knew *this* was possibly his only opportunity to win her heart.

He’d forever live with regret if he didn’t try.

Al was urged on by the sibilant shush of the sea, spotlighted by the moon. He had to have Amber. Couldn’t, wouldn’t let her go.

“Let me show you around? I promise, *promise*, you a good time.” His expression eased into a smile. “I am a good boy—really I am. Please?”

“Yes. I think I’d like that,” Amber said and freed her hands, “if you can spare the time of course.”

Al didn’t know before that second if he’d ever believed in love. But now, he was sure, if such a thing as love existed, he was surely in its thrall. Yes, love could happen with Amber—and may have happened already? True, Amber did most of the talking, and she was a little bizarre and morose with her topics of conversation, but bizarre and morose were different, and different was interesting. Al wasn’t a big talker—no loss there. He much preferred to listen, and Amber seemed to appreciate his silence. He didn’t understand why she found him interesting. More than likely, she was just a friendly girl who made friends easily and saw Al simply as company. Travelers were like that. None of that mattered though. She’d agreed to go away with him, and that would have to

be enough.

"Jenolan's not far from Nan's. We can go for a day, or stay there for the week if you really like that sort of thing. I've never been myself. Well, I have . . . but I didn't pay much attention. We could discover them together."

"To the Mayans, caves were places of religious significance." Amber took a strawberry from a bowl on the table and gently teased it into Al's mouth. The fruit was sweet, slightly tangy upon his tongue. "I hate doing the tourist thing," she said and rolled the strawberry between his lips. She tugged away the stem. "I want you to take me."

Al almost toppled backwards off his chair.

"Do you mind staying at Nan's? It's an old miner's cottage, not much; it's drafty. No Majestic, that's for sure, but we can do what we want." He paused—embarrassed silence. "I understand if you don't want to . . . you hardly know me. There are motels you can stay in if you'd prefer."

"Is it remote?" Amber placed a strawberry in her mouth and crushed it in the side of her jaws.

"Very."

"Perfect." She smiled. Her teeth glistened.

Al pinched himself under the tablecloth. He nipped his skin between his nails so hard he thought he'd broken the skin and continued until his eyes began to water. He didn't know if his tears were from the pinch, the wine, or simply Amber's face silhouetted before the moon. He pinched himself a second time, wanting to be sure this night was not a dream. Then he stopped, because if it was a dream, he didn't want to awake.

Fingerprints lifted from the dinner dishes had come back with a match.

Alex Herbert, twenty-eight, was a resident of Paddington. Arrested in '96 and '98 for possession of heroin. In '99, he served four months on a similar charge and was brought in and questioned in '01 over allegations that he'd spiked the drink of an American tourist, Billy Jay Lister, in a downtown nightclub. The charges were dropped after the intervention of Herbert's lawyer, Dennie Turncroft, who'd negotiated a settlement. Since then, Alex had stayed out of trouble and had kicked his habit. From the last reports of his parole officer, he worked as a service mechanic at an inner-city BMW dealership and attended the Salvation Army church twice Sundays. Apparently, he'd cleaned up his act pretty fast.

Until now.

It was 9:37 at night. Halmes and Scott braced themselves against the wall outside Herbert's front door on the second floor of a two-story apartment block, a shit-hole brick building, with an overgrown lawn in dire need of maintenance. Inside smelled of mould and damp, the walls and ceiling were badly cracked, and the paint was flaked like a layer of wood shavings. Uniformed constables were out front and back of the complex, guarding the exits. A paddy wagon was parked across the road behind Halmes' rusted Holden.

Scott drew his Glock 9mm and held it before his nose. He wore a blue, short-sleeve cotton shirt and dark pants. A vest of Lite Level IIA Body Armor covered his chest, and the flap hung over his groin.

Halmes was dressed in a wrinkled, brown suit. He put his hand inside his jacket and unclipped a bulky leather holster. Around his waist was a duty belt burdened with accessories: baton, Maglite, Smith & Wesson handcuffs, pepper spray, and radio pouch.

Herbert seemed to be home. From the road, dim lights could be seen through the outside curtain, and a stereo blared Pink Floyd's "Breathe" from their *The Dark Side of the Moon* album.

"Let's do this right," Halmes said. "I don't want no balls ups." He slipped his gun out past the jacket's lapel, a huge, stainless steel weapon that dwarfed his fist.

Scott looked at it with awe. "Screw me. That's not service issue."

Halmes examined his firearm. "S&W Model 500 Magnum. The most powerful production revolver in the world today, or so I was told by the salesman when I bought it. May only hold five rounds, but once this baby takes you down, you ain't getting back up." He exhaled onto the weapon's barrel, misting the steel. "I only bring this out for special occasions. This son of a bitch'll regret it if he runs tonight."

Scott didn't know whether to laugh or be concerned. Instead, he just sniffed. "I did *not* hear that. Just let me do the shooting."

Halmes stepped across to the top of the stairs and charged the door, shouldering it open; its rotten wood split down the center with a resounding crack. The door collapsed inwards, falling off its hinges. Halmes careened on inside.

Scott spun the corner leveling his gun, aiming inside down a gloomy hallway. "POLICE! Alex Herbert, DO NOT MOVE! Maintain your current position and

yell out to indicate your location. If you do not, you will be shot!”

Halmes regained his balance and stepped aside. The plaster gave a crackling noise as he pressed his back against the wall. He lifted his gun before his chest.

The apartment was hazy with incense. A hallway of grimy, floral carpet led into the premises, straight into the lounge. A man could be seen lying naked on the floor beyond a row of thick, white candles, smoking at the foot of a couch. Unlit doorways flanked either side of the hallway, and there was a small alcove leading off to the right about halfway down.

The man looked up the hall toward Halmes. “That’s my fucking door, shitheel,” he shouted in a drawl, looking nonplussed.

“Alex Herbert, this is the police! Raise your hands in the air.” Scott trained his revolver on the naked man, stepped over the ruined door, and carefully made his way up the hallway. “Is there anyone else in the premises?”

Herbert shook his head.

“Is there anyone in the premises?” Scott shouted.

“No!”

Halmes pocketed his gun.

Herbert lifted his hands with a cigarette smoking between his fingertips.

Halmes took out his baton from the nylon holder attached to the side of his belt. Fumbled with the cuffs.

Scott maneuvered past each open doorway in turn, keeping his weapon trained on Herbert at all times. Glancing into the shadows of each opening.

Halmes peered inside the first side door and flicked on the light. An unmade single bed was in the far corner, beside a dressing table chaotic with aerosol cans and empty liquor bottles. A chalk portrait of an elderly woman—possibly Herbert’s mother—hung on the wall above the bed. Cardboard boxes were lined up beneath the window. A walking machine stood in the center of the floor beside a linen basket of dirty washing. A pile of socks lay at the foot of the bed.

Herbert lowered one hand and took a drag from his cigarette—the ember flared fire orange.

“DON’T MOVE!” Scott yelled and thrust forward his weapon, aiming at Herbert’s eye. He’d just passed the toilet and stood directly before the lounge-room door. Herbert could be seen clearly, lying on that floor naked, an erection slowly retreating between his thighs.

“Chill, dude. Ash’s fallin’ in me friggin’ eyes.” Herbert spoke holding his breath—his voice was strained.

Sandalwood incense barely covered the distinct smell of cannabis.

“Enough crap.” Halmes walked up the hallway, took out his handcuffs, and put away the baton. “You’re in a lot of shit, buddy. You’re under arrest for murder, plus a few other charges I’ll dig out of my ass.”

Scott stepped into the room, straddling Herbert’s legs and aimed the gun downward at the naked man’s forehead.

That bastard wasn’t going anywhere.

The lounge room was small. Halmes smelled something cooking, or rather burning, in the kitchen through the opposite door. Herbert lay amidst a scattering of clothes—dim shadows on the floor. Jeans, underpants, a white cotton T-shirt, socks, and a pair of shoes. An open bottle of Kentucky bourbon stood beside a MAD mug and Vegemite jar full of booze. The CD player sat on the floor beneath the window, and a newspaper had been disseminated around the carpet. An old box TV was directly beside the door upon which a half-dozen incense sticks smoldered in glass jars.

“Having a bit of a jerk off, happy boy?” Scott looked at Herbert as if the man were nibbling dog turds.

Herbert sucked his joint watching the barrel of the gun. “You’re makin’ a *big* mistake,” he said softly, exhaling smoke. “If I was you, I’d get my ass outta here.” His eyes fixed on Scott as he spoke, and he giggled with his eyes glassy, as if he were some stuffed museum exhibit and Scott were a child looking through the glass.

“Is that a threat, asshole?” Scott leant forward and pressed the barrel of the Glock firmly on Herbert’s skull. “Because if it is, I ain’t shakin’.”

And that’s when Halmes caught a movement in the corner of his eye. He was standing behind Scott, reaching down to Herbert with the cuffs in hand, when a shadow passed before the open kitchen door. He went to cry out—too late—the roar of cannon fire obliterated his voice.

Heated shot tore up Scott’s jacket, side and back.

Scott was spun around as his shoulder flew apart like mince thrown into a fan. A chunk of bloody muscle plashed against the wall. His grip opened. The Glock—now dangling from his trigger finger—dropped away.

A gunman stepped forward into the room, a smoking, squat-black shotgun braced against his shoulder. Herbert dropped the cigarette and covered his face with his hands, squealing. Halmes dove forward, arms reaching for the floor. Scott stood there, slowly turning around where he stood. His arm was pulped

mash, and his hands were open and outstretched by his side.

The shotgun discharged a second round.

Scott had his back to the shooter and took the blast in the back of the head. The top portion of his skull exploded like an overripe watermelon hit by a lorry and sprayed the room with blood, scalp, bone chips, and slugs of brain.

Scott's body went face-first into the television, smashing the glass, scattering incense and jars. Herbert curled up his knees and began an undulating yelp. Halmes drew his Magnum.

Time seemed to slow at that point. Halmes felt as if the room had spun out of reality and into a stellar vortex where movement slowed, and his mind sped up. Scott's body jerked in spasm, head through the blue-sparking screen of the TV, boot kicking at the carpet. Herbert had curled up into this pathetic, screeching ball, covering his head with his hands—as if his fingers could somehow stop a shotgun blast—with his back to Halmes.

The gunman was dressed in a three-quarter length, black leather coat open to reveal his bare chest; his skin on his upper torso and neck glistened in the candlelight as if oiled. His head was shaven and mottled with stubble, and he had a prominent jaw with a double chin and tiny almond eyes like German cockroaches. He wore no shoes and tight-fitting denim jeans. The shotgun had a twin-tube magazine, ridged stock, and barrel. About twenty-seven inches in length, it was a compact weapon, a firearm-juggernaut tucked neatly into the man's side. Halmes had heard of such weapons—imported Neostead twelve gauges. The shooter pumped another cartridge into the firing chamber and took aim at Halmes on the floor.

"Time to die, motherfucker," the gunman said with a scowl.

Then the world sped up again, and all Halmes could smell was gunshot. He rolled forward into Herbert. The shotgun boomed. Smoking, its muzzle slightly lifted as it fired. Another spent cartridge ejected onto the floor. Carpet and underlay billowed, forming a dust devil. Another round was pumped.

Halmes turned and squeezed the Magnum's trigger; the revolver discharging was like a thunderbolt in that small space. Halmes' hand jerked violently backwards from the weapon's recoil. An oil slick of blood sprayed behind the gunman, and he was lifted off his feet and thumped into the kitchen doorway with the brittle crunch of his spine. Halmes fired a second shot—plaster scattered down from the ceiling above the door.

"Fucker!" The gunman clutched at his side; swaying, he brought the shotgun

to bare. Fired.

Herbert's thigh turned to red pate.

Halmes rolled backward across the floor, tumbling and came up into a crouch. He aimed the Magnum, fired, missed—a large portion of doorframe exploded into splinters. Herbert bellowed and clutched at his ruined leg.

Baldy pumped the shotgun.

Halmes fired, and the shooter took the round an inch below his nose. His head snapped away; the lower half of his face and a large portion of his neck disappeared in a spray of shredded flesh. The bullet continued on into the wall.

Halmes lowered his gun, waiting for the man to fall.

The shooter turned to face Halmes. He seemed to be grinning in that shadowy room, his upper teeth moving up and down as he gurgled and tried to speak, blood bubbling and flowing from his gaping throat. A portion of jawbone dangled from a string of flesh.

"What the fuck?" Halmes couldn't believe what he was seeing. By rights, this man should be dead. By rights, the gangly bastard *was* dead, but his brain just didn't know it.

Baldy aimed the shotgun and fired.

Halmes' hand exploded at the wrist. The Magnum was thrown across the room and struck the stereo. Pink Floyd jumped.

Baldy staggered forward, head wobbling on the quivering remains of his neck, and pumped the shotgun. He fired and blew apart the arm of the couch. Pumped in another round.

Gibbering, Herbert heaved himself upright, toward his friend, his lover, threw himself forward. . . . and took a shotgun blast in the face. His body spun and slapped backward into the floor.

Baldy reeled across the room, blood surging down his jacket and arm. "Gosh ta hell, m'fuck'r!" Filthy spume spilled from his throat.

Halmes clutched at the stump of his wrist, quaking, not believing, glaring upward into that matte-black eye of death looking down at him from the smoking barrel of a gun. Aimed by a zombie, a man without a face, who'd somehow managed to take the best the Magnum had to offer and walk away with half a smirk. "It's impossible," he repeated over and over. He looked at the protruding bones that were once attached to a hand.

"Time ta die, m'fuck'r," Baldy said with a croak.

The shotgun pumped home a round.





## Chapter 5: “The Blue Mountains”

Constable Dick Kahn was pacing across the back yard when the first shot went off inside. Dressed in black pants and a dark T-shirt with POLICE in white lettering on his chest and back, he felt ready for anything . . . except a gunfight. He wasn't wearing any body armor, and his orders were to simply guard the rear door and stop the suspect Alex Herbert from fleeing the premises.

And he intended to do just that—nothing more.

Kahn drew his pistol and ran to the fence, crouching in the long grass beside an empty Pepsi bottle, eyes trained on that exit, wishing he could disappear into the dark.

The shots continued. Screams came inside, agonized cries, more gunfire. The retort of a terrible weapon, and Kahn imagined himself a Digger in the trenches hearing Howitzers sending soldiers to their dooms.

That gun again—twice. More screams.

“What the bloody hell's going on in there?” he muttered and almost went to investigate.

“You coming in?” Constable Jensen appeared at the rear door, dressed like Kahn, except he wore a backward baseball cap on his straight brown hair.

Kahn almost let loose a shot.

“I've called for backup. Halmes may need us up there.”

And it was settled, because if Kahn didn't go up there now, Halmes would certainly chew his balls for breakfast. He had to support his partner—had to follow Jensen.

*Stupid prick.*

Kahn thought of his wife, Jenny, asleep at home. Pictured his daughter, Sarah, who'd just turned three—blond, curly hair, peppermint eyes, and a smile that bled sunshine. He'd brought Sarah a red tricycle for her birthday, and the little sprite had squealed with delight when she saw it. Rode it round the backyard, around and around the clothesline pretending it was a pony.

Kahn didn't want to die, but this was his job, and he had to follow stupid-ass Jensen. He'd sworn to protect and serve.

Jensen cautiously made his way up the stairwell, gun drawn, peering up, alert for any signs of movement. The shots continued, seemingly reverberating from the plaster and the bricks. A dimpled, plastic light shade quivered.

Then they were on the second floor. Jensen scooted across the landing and pressed back against the side of the door. At least he'd had the sense not to cut across the opening. Kahn huddled below the top of the stairs.

"What do we do?" Kahn asked in a hushed voice.

Jensen didn't answer. He was breathing fast, as if he were working himself up to dive into an icy lake. His eyes were wide open—too far—like marbles in a wax dummy's face, glass that couldn't see a damn.

"This is fucked." Kahn tried to remember if he'd loaded his weapon. He tried to remember his training—shooting at sights and paintball. Nothing had prepared him to shoot a man.

And those shots continued, yells, a thump as someone fell, cursed, and a ragged pleading from inside.

Jensen spun into the hall, aiming his gun into shadow, swore, and yelled, "POLICE—DROP IT!"

Silence.

Jensen barked commands and strolled carefully down the hall as Kahn ran to Jensen's former position and pressed against the wall with the plaster at his back. He wondered if Jenny was watching television or if she'd gone to bed? Would she truly miss him if he died?

Jensen's gun fired—once, twice, three times—there was a roar like a pipe bomb blowing out a drainpipe and a scream. A thump. Someone went down in the hall—Jensen.

Kahn spun around the corner and aimed down the hall.

A ragged shadow swayed in the far room; Jensen writhed at its feet. Kahn squeezed the trigger of his pistol. The gunman jerked, and stepped backward, then aimed his rifle or shotgun and fired at Jensen on the ground.

Jensen jerked and went still.

Kahn roared, a cry of disbelief and outrage, walking up the hallway, shooting rounds. And the gunman danced; shells tore through his body, some hit the wall, most found flesh. The cloaked man dropped his shotgun when two bullets broke up his shoulder. He veered to the left, groaned as a bullet found his back. He stumbled and fell away from sight.

Kahn reached Jensen. His chest was open—ribs sticking out through gore—belly oozing strange innards that had flowed away to suckle on the skirting board. The stink was terrible.

"Fuck!" Kahn didn't know how many shots he'd fired. He picked up Jensen's

gun.

A crash of breaking glass sent Kahn bounding into the room with two guns drawn; he almost tripped over Scott's body. The room was filled with shadows and dancing candlelight, and the window had been smashed out; a night breeze disrupted smoke and made it swirl.

Scott had half a head missing, and the second corpse was minus a face. Kahn grimaced and felt his stomach transform into a school of prawns wearing jetpacks that tried to rocket out his throat. The gunman wasn't to be seen—only the moon distant in the sky. The shotgun lay beside the couch.

"Fuck!"

Halmes was slumped beside the stereo, clutching his wrist, mouthing pleas for help. Kahn went to the detective, knelt, and stripped off his belt. He holstered one gun, put the other by his knee, and strapped up Halmes' wrist to stem the tide of blood.

The warbled sirens could be heard across the city.

"You'll be fine. Just hang in there, man." Kahn tightened the belt. Halmes' eyes rolled.

Then there was a sound—something moved, or stood—and Kahn turned, thinking perhaps Scott or Jensen had somehow survived, but he was wrong.

A faceless, naked corpse swayed upright to its feet, shotgun in one hand, with the hair on his chest twitching in the breeze. The corpse's head was a red moonscape dripping skin and clots. Kahn just stared. The zombie's arm jerked forwards, shoving the shotgun's barrel beneath Kahn's nose, and fired.

Halmes didn't know if it was the blast rupturing his eardrums or the wash of warm blood on his face that brought him around, but his mind cleared just in time to see Constable Kahn lose his face.

"Shit!" Halmes rolled, babbling nonsense, in a half-state of consciousness. He jumped upright, grabbing a bottle of bourbon and swung it down onto the naked zombie's head, smashing the bottle, dousing it in whiskey.

But that did nothing.

The corpse batted him away with the barrel of the shotgun.

Halmes fell as he was struck and landed on the stereo, smashing it as he landed. He found his revolver with his left hand while his stump smeared the wall. The zombie fumbled with its weapon, pumping home a round. Halmes heard the shotgun's crack—plaster showered his head and face. He aimed

wildly, shot, and only clipped the zombie's arm.

The headless-thing stumbled a few steps backward, swaying on its feet, reaching for the barrel of its weapon with its one free arm. Then it tripped on Scott's outstretched leg and fell sideways, landing on a row of burning candles.

Flames roared. The zombie sizzled as its body became a pyre, paper and whiskey all igniting at once. Fanned by that night breeze, the room was ablaze in an instant. Flames danced up the walls.

Halmes pocketed his Magnum. Looking at the billowing fire, unable to move, his eyes becoming a blur. He said, "Oh shit," and slumped against the wall. Amid the darkness that embraced him, he heard a corpse scream.

Rod Foreman, Al's supervisor, wasn't exactly happy about Al taking an unforeseen leave of absence, but Al simply didn't care. Programming jobs were easy to come by, and he was a decent programmer. Al was confident he could find work and, worst comes to worst, wouldn't be out of employment for long if he were fired. He phoned in pretending he had a bad case of allergies and flu and insisted on using his holidays instead of taking sick leave. He informed Rod he was heading to his grandmother's house in the mountains for the week to recuperate and get some clean air into his lungs.

Rod complained bitterly—he was a bloody whinger and a typical bureaucrat. He insisted Al stay local in case he was needed for online support. Nan's house conveniently had no phone—not one Al was willing to tell Rod about anyway. Al was adamant, however, and in the end got his way. He simply didn't leave Rod any choice.

The next six days were exquisite. Al and Amber visited the limestone caves at Jenolan and hiked along the windy trails at Bodie and Misty Heights. They held hands as they walked around the lake at Wentworth Falls, and Al hugged Amber as they gazed upon the cascading waterfalls on the remote cliffs from Pulpit Rock. At night, they'd eat at some of the many restaurants abounding in the mountain towns and return home along the bumpy dirt road to Al's childhood home.

The house was an isolated weatherboard cottage. Originally a miner's hut, it only had two bedrooms, a lounge, a bathroom, and a poky kitchen with a wood-fire stove. The place had a rusted tin roof, and peeling paint walls, and was situated on the top of a sandstone cliff overlooking Blue Gum Gorge. A place alone amid a forest of pale ghost gums. At night, the trunks of the pallid trees

would glow silver in the moonlight, while the Milky Way revealed itself, hinting of mysteries waiting to be discovered by future generations of man.

Memories of Nan were trapped within the walls of the house. Black-and-white photographs of people long dead sat in dusty frames. A pair of pink, plastic glasses lay forgotten on the mantelpiece. The closets were full of mothballs, dresses, skivvies, and slacks that Al just could not bare to throw away. The house smelled of old incense and dust.

They spent the evenings beneath the curtain-less windows. Al and Amber would sit before the fireplace and drink green tea or hot chocolate thick with marshmallows while insects buzzed against the screens, lured by the saffron glow of the coals. Al would sit enraptured while Amber narrated stories into the early hours of the morning. They laughed, and joked, and teased each other, and discussed just about everything from UFOs to politics, world poverty and war. Amber spoke at length about the Mayans. She seemed to be somewhat of an expert. Al's curiosity about the topic waned as the days passed, but he feigned interest anyway.

Al longed to kiss Amber, but was anxious in case she spurned his affection. He'd never been with a woman before, but sorely needed to cleanse himself from Pete's taint. Unsure and inexperienced, he was convinced he'd be a lousy lover. What if Amber didn't share his feelings? Yet, she'd watch him for hours with those mesmerizing eyes. Al was so plain. Amber was exotic. Al was nothing but an overweight programmer who'd slept with a gay. Amber was beautiful, cultured, traveled, nothing short of a goddess. Al's life had been so ordinary; it almost seemed wasted by comparison. Al became seriously confused as to what to do.

On their last night together, Al became so nervous, he could hardly think.

They dined at a local French restaurant where they shared the *Hors D'oeuvres Bounty* with smoked salmon, truffle mousse, tender shrimp, lobster medallions and caviar, while sipping a Barossa Chardonnay. Al gorged himself on *Tournedo Rossini*—fillet mignon topped with truffled goose liver mousse in sauce Périgueux. Amber enjoyed the *Filet de Veau Oscar*—tender milk-fed veal topped with crabmeat and flooded with sauce Béarnaise. They'd shared the *Assiette de Salades Variees*.

Afterwards, they returned home, and Al thought he hit an animal on the road—possibly a cat. But when they stopped, Al couldn't find anything. If Al had hit anything, it had survived and run away.

Once home, the pair sipped hot chocolate before the fire. Amber sat on the couch, and Al was on the floor by her feet staring into the flames.

Amber ran her fingers through Al's hair. "You can kiss me, you know," she said. Her voice sounded dry and husky.

Al hugged his mug for heat. He looked at Amber and took a deep breath. "You sure? I want to."

"I know you do." Amber stuck out her tongue and giggled. "Tonight's your chance to discover a new world. I won't bite . . . hard," she said, enunciating the word. Her smile widened; her teeth glimmered in the dark.

Al put down his drink and inched across the couch, a specter passing before the flames. He could feel particles of grit beneath his knees. He sidled up to Amber and turned his lips toward her face.

Amber was dressed in a velvet dress that dangled to her ankles. A small, gold ring was on her little toe. Al leant forward across her lap. He could feel the warmth of her full bosom as he pressed against her body. He inhaled her breath as she exhaled.

Their lips touched. Hers were soft and cold. Al delighted in their bitter taste.

Amber drew up his tongue, teasing it from his mouth with her own. She pulled it within her own warm lips and held it gently between her teeth, eyes dilating. The shadows in the room seemed to lengthen. The wind assailed the cottage. Al, distracted by the rising erection in his pants, pulled away.

"You're a shy one," Amber purred. "I think I like that."

Al eased himself onto the lounge and placed his arm behind Amber's back. "I guess I was afraid. I didn't want to lose you."

Amber looked at Al as if he were suddenly the most interesting person in the world. "You won't lose me, silly." Her hand edged onto his knee and began to rub his leg. "I've been searching for someone just like you. You're different . . . perfect." She pecked his lips repeatedly and finally whispered very softly, "The time is right. You're everything I need, and after tonight I'll always be a part of you."

Al wasn't listening. He ran his fingers through her hair. Gently caressed and licked the nape of her neck. Kissed her skin and lapped its sweet saltiness into his mouth, as she gently ran the tips of her nails down his spine.

The wind blustered, making the windows stir and rattle. Moths swarmed outside, spiraling around the light bulb. The tin roof clattered, and the house creaked. Darkness grew out of the cracks in the walls and floor.

Amber pushed Al backward against the couch and lifted up her skirt as she straddled him. She pulled his face between her heaving breasts, her breath deepening.

She gently pinched Al's belly. "You're a bit fat."

Al didn't know how to respond.

Amber licked her lips and smiled, deflating his anger and embarrassment. "I like it. I appreciate a man that's healthy."

Then she lowered herself onto his lap, nails creeping around his thighs. Al's breath began to come in short, shallow gasps. He struggled to contain his erection, but couldn't, and grabbed Amber around the waist, and pulled her against his chest. The room grew dim. Amber sighed and gently teased her nails around his crotch. Al kissed her deeply and began to knead her breast.

"Easy, lover," Amber said with her eyes closed. "I'm not clay." Then she took his hand and gently guided his fingertips around the mound of her bosom. "Softly. Slowly," she sighed. "There's plenty of time for rough stuff later on."

They kissed for what seemed like an hour, rolling about on the lounge. Amber's mouth offered nectar, and Al feasted upon it like a delirious bee. He licked her skin, sucked in the air trapped within her hair, held her body against his own, wanting to sink into her flesh. He lay beneath her and rhythmically pushed his hips between her own, rising and falling beneath her groin.

The gale outside intensified, and the walls shuddered, but Al barely noticed. A chill draft whistled beneath the door.

Amber rose and pulled away. She stood above Al as Al lay on his back on the lounge, with his legs dangling on the floor. Amber's hand went behind her back and, ever so slowly, inched the zipper of her dress down her spine. Amber became a silhouette, an outline of the night, the glow of the fire a golden nimbus around the outline of her face.

Al was breathless. He couldn't speak or move and was barely able to breathe. He felt as if his heart were about to seize up within his ribs. His penis tried to poke a hole through the front of his jeans.

Amber's velvet dress fell away from her body like a dead husk. She was naked. The coals seemed to flare, sending slivers of flame soaring up the chimney. The firelight highlighted the contours of Amber's mahogany flesh; the skin of her body was slightly lighter than that of her face. The nipples on her hanging breasts protruded, and the talon of pubic hair between her thighs was blacker than the void.

Al was breathless. Paralyzed. All he could do was stare into Amber's almond eyes—her pupils had consumed the whites, making her eyeballs completely black. He sank into her gaze.

Amber knelt before him and slowly began unbuckling his pants. Al undid his shirt and threw it into the fireplace, trying to be romantic, but the nylon in the material shriveled and filled the room with a plastic stink.

"Sorry."

Amber glanced at the fire as it ate away the cloth, then pushed Al back into the couch, and leant over him. She took hold of his jeans, and removed them with her teeth, then curled the material on the side of his underpants around her fingers, and ripped them away like a rag.

Al cried out. "Shit!" He doubled over. "My balls!"

Amber placed her index finger firmly over his lips. "Shhhh," she hissed. Her nails were red. "Roll over," she commanded.

Al turned and knelt on the edge of the lounge. Amber began tracing snake trails around the curve of his buttocks with the points of her nails.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Amber placed the flat of her palm on the small of Al's back and gently pressed down. With her other hand, she pushed his knees apart.

"What are you doing?" Al's voice sounded shaky.

"Quiet." There was no arguing with Amber's voice.

The slender blade of a nail slid into the core of Al's anus.

"Amber. . ."

She cut him off: "I want to. Sit still. I need to do this for you." Her finger sank deeper. "It's my gift."

Al could feel the hard bone of Amber's finger parting the blind eye of his bum. He tried to relax, but couldn't. She eased her finger deep inside him. He breathed steadily and tried to endure this unique foreplay as she gently rotated her fingertip, spinning it in a rhythmic circle. Al didn't feel comfortable. He'd never had a finger up his bottom before. Despite it all, his penis felt increasingly hard.

Amber removed her finger suddenly.

Al yelped. "SHIT!" He spun around on the lounge, and grabbed his backside, and bounced on the seat like a man on the toilet who'd passed broken glass. "You hurt me. I think I'm fucking cut! Your nail. Shit."

Amber pulled back onto her haunches and looked playfully repentant. "I'm

sorry. I must have caught you on the way out.” She eased forward, and stilled Al’s legs with a powerful grip, lowered her head, and lapped at his inner thigh. “I just wanted to give you something to remember me by.”

Al laughed dryly. “I’ll remember that bloody all right. Damn, that’s painful.” He held his bottom, and squirmed, but couldn’t move his legs where Amber held him. Al pulled his arm around. A small smear of blood was in hollow of his palm. “You cut me!”

Amber pushed him back and rose to stand over him. Shadows seemed to gather about her head, obscuring her face, and all that could be seen was the pinprick glow of her eyes.

Amber straddled his hips. She pulled apart the lips of her vagina. A creamy wetness glistened between her exposed cleft.

“I don’t have protection,” said Al.

“You don’t need it,” Amber said. “You can’t get me pregnant. Be assured of that.” She lowered her body.

A sodden heat engulfed Al’s penis.

Al lay immobile as Amber—a moving shadow—rose up and down upon him. He closed his eyes and tried not to think, the pain in his anus forgotten. A new sensation gathered within his groin. Amber sighed often and rode him up and down, her full breasts brushing against his face.

Al looked up and said he was in love.

The room had grown pitch black. The fire struggled against the night. Shadows multiplied and crawled about the ceiling and floor like spooks. Amber’s movements grew increasingly faster, rising, falling, rising upon Al’s member.

Al’s brain began to garble. What was this sensation building? What was this magic oozing through his veins? Energy built to an explosion. He thrust forward with his hips, ass clenching, and his groin became a tsunami of pleasure.

Al cursed, knowing he’d come too soon, but Amber continued to ride him, grunting as she did. Al could feel his penis deflating like a balloon with a tiny puncture.

Amber placed her hand upon the base of his throat and pushed Al firmly back into the lounge.

“I’m sorry.” Al croaked. Amber pushed harder on his neck, strangling his words.

Al found it difficult to breathe, but tried to tolerate the discomfort, hoping

that Amber would climax.

Amber's vulva clutched at his penis, sucked him up and back into her body, throttling the head of his cock like a sacrificial goat. Her vagina tightened, throbbing around him, hardening his rod. Amber pulled him back into herself. Deeper. Deeper. Up toward her heart, up until Al felt he was touching the very base of her womb. The heightened sensitivity of his penis became painful.

Al couldn't breathe. He began to panic and snatched at Amber's hand.

*"DO—NOT—MOVE!"* Amber enunciated each word forcibly, baring her teeth and squeezing his throat.

Al struggled, and kicked, and tried to unlock her fingers, but she was too powerful for him. Her grip was unbreakable, and Amber's face had transfigured into a contorted mask. Every nightmare Al had ever experienced resurfaced at that instant, gazed upon him, rode him with delight, and cruelly mocked. Amber was a night hag fucking him dry, and her movements intensified, around and on top of him, squeezing his hips, throttling his penis that was now captive within her body. Al couldn't withdraw. Amber bounced her hips up and down on his lap.

An intense pain thrust inside Al's hardened penis, as if somehow a heated needle had been inserted down his urinary tract. Al screeched, kicked, bucked, and twisted from side to side, but Amber held him firmly by the throat, pressing him so far into the couch the seat pivoted back, and the springs groaned. Al gurgled, bit. Tears came unbidden to his eyes and spat down his cheeks. The pain continued into his scrotum—a million wasp stings assailing his crotch.

*"Please, please, please, please, please!"*

A thumping crescendo commenced on the walls of the cabin as if rabid possums were attempting to break apart the house with their claws. The glass of the windows shuddered in their frames. Coals sparked. Amber hissed and gripped Al's throat with an inhuman strength, nails digging into his neck, her eyes bulging in their sockets until they somewhat resembled insect orbs.

A wave of numbness rushed down Al's penis and into his groin. It coursed along his veins into his legs, dulling sensation, stilling movement. Bile rose in Al's guts.

*"Please God, no."*

*"Be still, lover,"* Amber said and shushed him. *"It's always hard the first time, more pain than pleasure losing your virginity. The discomfort will pass, and then we'll be one."* The fire flared as if the logs had been struck, and Amber's face was

illuminated for a second. Al got the impression of an enormous insect riding him with a hard and chitinous shell. Dark fangs protruded from the sides of Amber's mouth like the mandibles of a bug. Her nipples were distended and scratched his chest like roach legs.

Al screeched or tried to, but no sound came out of his stony throat. His mind scrambled into confusion. A window smashed with an explosion of flying glass. The wind howled about the room.

Amber's stomach began to pulsate, and Al looked up as the wind tossed her hair. Amber's larval flesh began undulating like the stomach of a crazed belly dancer. Her shoulders sagged, and she slumped forward, releasing her hold upon his throat.

Al was paralyzed. Venom had deadened his nerves and slaughtered his muscles.

"I found him," Amber wheezed into his ear, her words barely audible above the gale. "A god came to me at night as I have come to you, *lover*."

*Lover*. That word was an insult—the vilest of curses!

Amber sighed. "You were pure and worthy, and now I have made you immortal."

Al wanted to shake his head, to scream or shout angry curses, but couldn't do a thing. He couldn't speak, move—could barely breathe. He couldn't even shut his eyes to wish this nightmare away.

Amber's face began to droop. Her breasts shrank and her cheeks, once radiant, began to retreat and conform to the shape of her skull. Her mouth popped open—a ball of foam splattered onto Al's chest. Her shoulder collapsed with a wet, slurping sound, and Amber's left arm dropped off onto the floor. Her stomach heaved—flesh melted into putrescence. Al's head was thick with a fungal stink. He could see bones straining beneath that thinning skin, as Amber's body deflated upon his chest. An eyeball popped out and dangled from its optic nerve. The jawbone fell away like the crumbling mouth of a mummy.

A silent scream vibrated through Al's every cell. He wanted to shut his eyes but couldn't. He stared unblinkingly, as the woman he'd fallen in love with decomposed upon his chest.

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